

LONE TREE

HARRY
LEON
WILSON

Ben Carcross's idea of Paradise was his own beloved Lone Tree Ranch—and then one day he struck oil! You will enjoy this rugged member of the West's Old Guard and his struggle against wealth and a climbing family!



LONE TREE

By

HARRY LEON WILSON


Ben Carcross's idea of Paradise was the very spot where he happened to be living, which was the Lone Tree Ranch. Then oil was struck on Ben's property, and the ranch began to look like the Garden of Eden during apple week.

Ben thought that God had intended him to be a simple cattleman. Ben's wife thought the time had come to acquire a few complexes, show the neighbors some style, and startle the natives of Europe.

Ben landed in the hospital for one of those de luxe operations in which the surgeon does everything but autograph the scar. In self-defense he annexed a doctor of philosophy, an aviator, and two nurses, incidentally helping one of the nurses to abduct a baby they both liked.

The family fortune went west with a crash, and Ben was again at peace—until along came another uninvited gusher and another fortune, and Ben's troubles began anew. "Lone Tree" is Harry Leon Wilson at his best—and that's high praise for any book.

LOOK ON THE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS JACKET



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LONE TREE

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Harry Leon Wilson



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CHAPTER ONE

BACK in the earlies Ben Carcross began to have trouble with his eyes. Not out-of-doors—he still had the far-reaching look; could catch a brand with the best of them—but with small print by lamplight. There were spots and headaches. So he journeyed to the city, bought him a pair of spectacles—chosen with some care from a tray on a counter—and his troubles were over. He was then a tall, spare-framed man of erect carriage, a bit north of forty, swarthy of skin and black-haired; large-featured, with a boldly jutting nose, a rugged chin, and a wide but gentle mouth.

Twenty years later the glasses had begun to grow dim from wear and tear. He had been careful with them, putting them in their case upon the clock shelf after each night's reading, but the glasses unquestionably were no longer what they had been. Again, there began to appear curiously floating spots before the eyes, and ensuing headaches. But what could you expect for a dollar and a half, with a leather case thrown in? Probably even costly gold-framed spectacles wouldn't have lasted much longer; glass would go off like any other material.

Ben would have journeyed again to the city and bought him a fresh pair of glasses chosen from a tray on a counter, but lately a lot of money had suddenly happened to him; also, in the meantime, odd notions about the human eye had sifted beyond the city con-

finer, and his wife, Mrs. Adelaide Pettigrew Carcross—she that was Addie Carcross before the money happened and the calling cards were engraved—had by turns nagged and cajoled him into foregoing the simple privilege of a spectacle counter and made him promise to consult an eye specialist as became a man of wealth. So much Ben had promised: he would consult.

On a day, then, a score of years after his first purchase, still rugged, still wirily spare of frame, still with the far-reaching look in his out-of-door eyes, but with a bleached mane, as he might have put it, he made his first contact with the subtleties of modern diagnosis—that is, his sole contact outside a more or less informal chat at wide intervals with Doc Snell when Doc made the Lone Tree ranch for a meal. But Doc Snell, hotly maintaining that all a medical practitioner needed in any of God's cow country was a good knife and plenty of calomel, was hardly modern and assuredly not a specialist.

Ben found the man he had promised to consult and instantly appraised him as one of those city slickers; young and smooth-shaven; no reassuring whiskers like good old Doc Snell. And what did this man do, after testing Ben's eyes and pretending to listen like an owl to his story of the spots and headaches, but begin to chatter about teeth. Ben weightily assured the young squirt that he did not read the Butcher's Gazette or the Brandock Advertiser with his teeth. But the fool wilfully stuck to teeth; seemed crazy about teeth. He wouldn't come right out and tell you things straight, but, in a knowing and secretive way, seemed to be

keeping a lot to himself; and this manner, not less than the shining and sinister mechanisms of the man's lair, at length had the patient, as he later shamefully confessed to Doc Snell, "buffaloed."

He let the specialist talk and work his do-funnies; no use telling him the eyes were as good as ever; that he could read a brand, catch a swallow fork in the left ear of a heifer as far as the next man; no use pointing out more than three or four times that the whole trouble was, these glasses had wore dim with twenty years' handling. No use.

Teeth! He must have an X-ray taken—by another smarty likely—even after he'd proved he could read Q R X T or something that didn't make sense at an estimated distance of twelve feet. He listened to the X-ray command, staring meanwhile at a highly colored wall chart purporting to show the human eye vastly enlarged; a monstrous and really obscene image, painfully precise, with details perhaps accurate, but far better left under cover. He must submit to the foolish X-ray and come back at that hour tomorrow. Nice business; all for a pair of glasses to read at night with, while this young smarty himself and the stern-looking girl that handed him things apparently both had to wear glasses all day and every day.

For a moment Ben was prey to a panic impulse. He could run—"high tail it out" was how he worded the thought. But they had his address; they might make trouble for him. All right, he'd humor them; see just how far they'd carry their bluffs about teeth. There was no neighborly parting. They didn't ask him about the rainfall or whether there was a good winter stand

of grass or how the stock was doing. He slunk out through a crowded waiting-room whose occupants either ignored or glanced at him with a sort of uninterested hostility.

At Ben's second call the slicker condescended to show him the X-ray plates—dark fields lightening to pale gray in spots that might or might not be teeth. Not nice-looking; nothing he'd care to send around. The slicker pointed severely with a gold pencil to certain of the lighter spots and uttered his first and only human speech during his entire acquaintance with Ben Carcross.

"Just as I thought," he said.

Ben was never to know what he had thought or why those spots on the plate were just that. While the specialist wrote at the shiny desk, the contemptibly bespectacled girl who handed him things peered at Ben with some manifestly unflattering but secret conviction. He flinched and diverted his own gaze to the painful wall chart indecently exposing a human eye. He regarded this with mounting disgust until the specialist crisply spoke.

"Here's a prescription for your glasses. Leave it at that number and come back with the glasses when they're done. Then go to this dentist. Make an appointment first."

"All right, colonel," muttered the victim, knowing it was all wrong. Then he paid—insistently. They would have put him off till the next day, but Ben had a reason. Out in the friendly street, away from that pretension to secret and disquieting knowledge about him, away from the monstrous naked eye and the

glittering mechanisms, he withdrew the two slips from the pocket where, under surveillance, he had felt obliged to bestow them with apparent carefulness—the prescription and a dentist's address. He tore these into minute shreds and at the mouth of a windy alley made a little snow flurry of them. Never but by an unhappy chance would the specialist again meet this patient. Prescription for glasses! That was sure a good one. You had a prescription for medicine. You had a dentist for toothache.

Ben forthwith sauntered into an understandable emporium he had noticed the day before. Among other desirable merchandise it purveyed goods to meet his present need. Spectacles were handily shown on a counter between the small hardware and the jewelry. With a newspaper for the test he found his fit in no time. As simple as that! And the price amazingly cheap when one recalled the specialist's. Now he was safe and that slicker was fooled. True, the stern-looking girl had taken his address, but if they ever got suspicious and looked him up, he'd bluff it out. Give them the laugh. They couldn't do a thing to him, really, for running off that way. Sure they couldn't. He'd paid them on the nail. On his journey back to the ranch he stopped long enough in Branlock to have a laugh with good old Doc Snell over this clever outwitting of the slicker. Doc was one that could always see the funny side of things.

This was the first count in the Carcross indictment against an honored profession, although Ben placed the real blame on his money. His serious trouble began later in far-off New York, and he was never able to

view that hospital Calvary save as a calculated part and consequence of his sudden riches. Tactful inquiry would bring: "Yeah, I was going fine till I got big rich. They found I needed handling about one day after the oil gush on South Ranch."

This was not only grossly inaccurate but unfair to a number of skilled and ethical gentlemen. Six months was nearer the time, and the so-called handling had been imperative.

New York was too far from Doc Snell to profit by his wisdom—spots in front of you, dizzy spells, a lot of headaches, and one sort of fierce, sharp pain in a place where he'd never had one before. Anyone could have these symptoms, but alone in a big city, still more alone in a big and very polite, but uninterested hotel, Ben was mildly alarmed. His own diagnosis was that he suffered from a change in the drinking water. Communication with Doc Snell by wire brought the suggestion in a chatty night letter that he must have been eating too many rich store meals and that a man had better be careful in a strange city after having had his tubes rusted by so many years of baking-powder biscuits. Doc's wire concluded, "If you are not coming back soon, maybe you better see some doctor there. I hear they got good ones."

Ben decided not to see some doctor there. Why take a chance? But he couldn't get back to Doc Snell right away, because he was in New York under orders to meet Addie and the family when they came home from their grand trip to Europe and other foreign parts. That was when a man needed to be on his own feet—know where he was at.

Anyway, sometimes that big pain didn't last very long. He'd tough it out. Just one pain couldn't panic him. Of course, if he could happen to meet up with some good doctor over a meal or a drink—one of the right kind that wore whiskers and had some good medicine handy—he might mention this pain and get a prescription for it; but he wanted no truck with these young ones that would likely begin to chatter about teeth. Down in the hotel office there was a doctor's name on a brass plate, but Ben had never been able to get a look at the man himself and he wasn't taking chances in a strange town.

At that, he didn't feel too bad; he wouldn't make a mountain out of nothing much. He'd be careful, of course. Pay attention to his diet. Like the morning after he'd squirmed through a lot of those big pains without any sleep, when he ordered bacon and eggs for his breakfast instead of the conventional beefsteak. He was rather ashamed of this weakness, but he had somewhere heard a rumor that bacon was given to invalids. Probably it was this shame that gave him a distaste for the food when it came to his room. He couldn't eat even the eggs; town eggs he decided. He consumed only the ice water from the breakfast tray. Then he had a lot more ice water, being thirsty and curiously hot, although he could see from his high windows that the day was raw.

He became peevish when he found he didn't feel like dressing. It was irritating because there must be some simple remedy he could take—like that time Curly Hatton at the ranch had a rash and sent in for a bottle of medicine. That was a good one—a peach. Curly

claimed he was breaking out on his hide and told one of the boys going to town to fetch him a bottle of somebody's sarsaparilla compound. But when the bottle was brought that night there was Curly at the bunk-house door, draped in a blanket, dancing joyously and pointing to his work clothes spread out over a big ant hill. Yes, sir, Curly had nearly sloshed his insides with a bottle of medicine when all he needed was to use sense. He'd ought to of remembered about all those extra hands that had slept in the bunk-house at haying time—hands picked up here and there, not too clean or careful.

That's all you had to do—use common sense; not fly off the handle because of just one pain that made you want to drink all the water in the world, and not feel like getting up to go look at Grant's Tomb or Central Park. Especially when, aside from that one big pain, you'd never felt so well in your whole life; your mind never so active, thinking about a million good things you hadn't remembered for years.

A maid, looking like a fond mother, came to do his room and found him brightly talkative. "I ain't bed-fast," he assured the woman; "just lying here all lively and thoughtful." He told her about a number of things: about Curly Hatton's funny mistake; then about the time he was stirrup-dragged over on Barn-Top Mountain and lay out in the brush all night with a cracked shin; about the time he was on a cattle-buying trip and was held up in a little cañon the other side of Sheep Creek by one of the Grady boys. He knew Slim Grady even if he did have a bandanna over his face, and he begged for one of the twenty-

dollar gold pieces back as a loan while Slim held the gun on him. Afterward he repaid this Grady boy in front of the Branlock post office, not saying a thing except, "Here's that twenty I owe you, son," and they'd gone into the Merchant's Exchange bar and had a friendly drink out of the twenty. He told her about the time old Snooper, the dog, brought in some of the schoolteacher's most important clothes when she'd gone for a swim under a bunch of willows along the B. and J. ditch. And about Curly Hatton, who was dumb, thinking he had skin trouble one summer just after haying—

It was at this point that the wise maid rested a motherly hand on Ben's overheated brow and advised him to quiet down and be after getting some sleep or he'd be that close to a fever you couldn't tell the difference. Ben hotly retorted that he couldn't ever have a fever, because his teeth were as sound as hers, and that there were too many covers on the bed, and that he would tell her a good one about the time Curly Hatton—

The maid here crossed herself and went swiftly away. But Ben kept on talking. He was a little hurt by her desertion. Yet she might be out in the hall, where she could still listen, and his mind was rarely alive with good things to relate. He couldn't remember that he had ever felt so well.

He was delighted when the maid came back. He puzzled only a moment because the good soul had changed from her light blue uniform and cap into a man's dark suit. That was all right with Ben; she was such good company. He still had a thousand

things to tell her ; sure, she could wear what she pleased. He told her now about the time something funny happened to Curly Hatton ; and about the time old Snooper brought in some needful garments of the schoolteacher's and the very next day found the three Bayliss children when they got lost in the brush overnight, trying to find their mother that wasn't above ground any longer ; and about a comical incident in Curly Hatton's life ; and about his teeth being better than a lot of people's if it came to a showdown ; and about Bert Wingo, that his father tried to make a cow hand of him, but he wasn't any good and run off with a circus to turn flip-flops. Even when Bert was small and you'd be talking to him, he was liable any minute to burst into handsprings. Made good money with the circus, too ; still it wasn't any kind of a life to lead, and his folks didn't like it talked about. And he remembered a kind of laughable thing about Curly Hatton that had come from Texas. Funny about Texans ; give 'em a good hat and a good pair of boots and they never care what's in between. Anyway, this lump of a buckaroo had shed his rigging and spread it out over that big ant hill—

The maid had been acting queer, prodding him with a finger that was like a redhot poker. He swung on her once, but she ducked ; and anyway his arm was too heavy to swing right. But it was certainly funny how the whole family taught that mail-order catalogue to take a joke right after the oil gushed over on Sheep Creek, which run through that otherwise worthless South Ranch. They cut loose and ordered everything in the book that the picture of it looked good. And this reminded him—

The maid got plumb rough now and was taking him somewhere without his new suit that had a fancy handkerchief coyly peeping out of the breast pocket. Addie had made him pack two handkerchiefs—a shower and a blower—and the maid was still rough. Now she was going to ride the cockeyed roan that had killed better maids than she was, and he couldn't tighten the cinch because some fool had put in a rubber latigo that stretched and stretched. He warned her fair. "He's got a hump in his back. Better let me ride him a few saddles first, sister; just to take the rough off. You'll sure feel the breeze in your face on that outlaw, even if he don't stack you." But she was one of those you couldn't tell anything to. And there was a crowd at this rodeo and a funny high bell in a fancy delivery wagon that rang and rang and rang. Curly Hatton was laughing his fool head off, but Ben couldn't hear what it was all about because of that clanging bell. Never had a toothache in his life.

Which is, approximately, how Ben Carcross came to the high house of pain where was a herd of so-called doctors, but not one reassuring set of whiskers in the bunch. That was how they got him bayed up in one mean little cañon; and every time he'd start to climb out, grabbing at bits of brush, the roots would fetch loose and he'd slide farther down.

CHAPTER TWO

THE gray-faced elderly nurse who had given the anesthetic wheeled the stretcher from the operating room, densely fumed with ether, across the tiled corridor to the waiting elevator. The surgeon, still white-robed and rubber-gloved, but with his mask fallen under his chin, watched from the doorway until the car descended. When it stopped, the stretcher was trundled out, noiseless on its rubber tires, and down a corridor. In its wake, almost a cortège, came a white-coated hospital orderly and another nurse. The latter was a lightsome thing, glamorous-eyed, coltish, and fair to see. Lagging behind the catafalque, she once broke into a little dance step, uncomplicated, but rhythmic. On the stretcher, swathed in blankets and towels, lay the dismal effigy of a man.

It was Ben Carcross so transported—all that was mortal of Ben, with a hardly distinguishable residue possibly immortal. The neat little pushcart came to rest beside a white metal bed in a sunny room of ivory-tinted walls. The covers of the bed were thrown back, three hot-water bottles were removed and the remains of Ben skilfully laid to replace them between the warmed sheets. The young nurse, in charge now, turned the lifeless blank of a face to one side and thoughtfully adjusted a towel beneath the chin.

“And that’s that,” she fluted. She might have been singing it.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't anything," said the older nurse, who had given the anesthetic and trundled the stretcher. She briefly fingered an inert wrist, seeming to listen with eyes absorbed in something beyond such troubles.

"Drainage?" asked the young nurse.

The other nodded. "Cigarette drains; he used four."

"Good for three weeks." The young nurse spoke hopefully. "And say, you ought to see my new squirreline coat."

"Three weeks—or one day," replied the other doubtfully as she went out.

The surgeon who had operated came in. In his white coverall he had looked mountainous; divested of this he was still a bulk, with cushiony, clumsy-looking hands that promised but scant cunning. His small bright eyes, under a shelving forehead and brushy, dark brows, went to the figure on the bed. He was sweating and mopped the towering forehead with a handkerchief of lavender silk. As he reached for a wrist of his patient the young nurse stood aside, a look of subdued concern sobering her normally gay face. The surgeon's fingers lingered at the wrist but the fraction of a minute, seeming to listen there; then he wrote on a pad some directions for the nurse: Sips of hot water after the case came out from the ether; a hypo every four hours if necessary; the temperature every two hours instead of every four; pulse and respiration to be closely watched.

"Respiration's all right now," he said, "but he may get to fighting his breath when he comes out." The nurse nodded knowingly. "Anyway, it's up to him

now. Fifty-fifty," he concluded in his high but husky voice.

"Him and someone else," corrected the nurse with diplomatic guile.

"Not me, Miss Ellis." A funny bird, the nurse reflected, trying to look respectful but disbelieving; calling all the nurses Miss So-and-So. "I've concluded my part of the morning's entertainment. It's up to him. Oh, to God, maybe." His loose wrists gestured a deprecating tolerance. With feline lightness of tread he was at the door. "Any change before evening, call me."

Alone with her patient, the nurse regarded him with beautiful but calculating eyes. She sincerely hoped his chances were better than fifty-fifty. The squirreline coat was only half paid for. The case was breathing right, as if he merely slept. He'd be that way for an hour at least. So far, so good. She straightened one of the two rugs on the hardwood floor, picked up a dropped towel—an emesis towel they delicately called it—then, before the mirrored dresser, she regarded her own fair face long but earnestly. With the moistened tip of a finger she brought down a lock of the dark hair and curled it into a look of careless escape from under the jaunty cap that topped her uniform of white twill. After a lingering glance of approval for this minor scenic triumph she fumbled in her bag on the dresser, withdrew a flat case, apparently of gold, extracted a cigarette and went to the bathroom, where she smoked hurriedly and with deep inhalations, fanning the smoke out the open window, with frequent precautionary glances past the narrowly opened door.

The cigarette done and its incriminating traces re-

moved, she bestowed another look on her patient, then relaxed with her favorite photoplay magazine in the leather armchair beside the window. For an hour she was undisturbed, hovering as she listed above an enchanted world of screen favorites who were all beautiful and gifted, and who led profusely illustrated lives of singular felicity. There came at length a cavernous moan from the bed that modulated into a muttering—a succession of blurred and broken words, which carried nothing of interest to the nurse. She went to bend above the loosely working lips, only to learn that the case was boasting of perfect teeth. She giggled noiselessly.

“Now will you listen to that?” she demanded of an invisible audience. The muttering continued, gaining a bit of coherence. The case was protesting to someone he called Addie that he had done everything just like she told him—carried a shower and a blower.

“Now you be good,” admonished the nurse, and grasped a wrist to note the pulse. Respiration had increased, but he wasn’t yet fighting his breath. She went back to her magazine. She had written a month before to the editor of this colorful periodical asking the weight, height and color of eyes of her male screen favorite, also wishing to be told if he were really married and, if really married, whether his love life were happy. She was searching the department of answers to this and other vital queries and answered sternly when she heard the case demanding one Doc Snell.

“Doc Snell just jumped out the window,” she told him. The case’s utterance blurred again into mere

sound, and she resumed in the magazine an exciting search for her own initials. After a time she heard: "No, sir; since they got to using autos there ain't any more fishing that a man what knows fishing would call fishing."

"You better shush down," warned the nurse, "or I'll have to jab you."

But the case babbled on, now of someone he called Squat Ranson in a town called Branlock, who was a sight to see. The tone was firmer, the elocution improved. Squat Ranson, it appeared, was broad across the shoulders the same as a heron is between the eyes, and balder than bald, having in this respect but one advantage over a turkey egg—he lacked the freckles. And crooked—couldn't walk without stepping on his own shadow. Didn't he sell a dozen sacks of potatoes to the B. and J. people, and didn't they find a length of empty stovepipe at the center of every sack? Not good stovepipe—you could bet all the rice in China on that. Frauding his way along. But kind of comical. Tried to work off a spavined old wreck of a cayuse to the Second National that had his note for a hundred bucks. And when John J. Hendricks says, "What would I do with that animal?" Squat says, "Ride him, dang you! That's what Jesse James done." You had to laugh at the cuss sometimes.

"Pipe down, sailor," ordered the nurse. The sharpness of this penetrated the delirium.

"I won't either, pipe down! Who do you think you are?"

"Well, you'd be surprised."

The case's words again merged in a throaty but

violent muttering, which the nurse divined to be profane in intention. An arm was flung from under the cover, feebly mutinous, and the gray head made a futile try to leave the pillow. "Side-lined and cross-hobbled," he was heard to admit.

"I'll say you are!" Impatiently the nurse tossed her magazine aside and went to prepare the hypo that was so plainly needed. Over an alcohol lamp she boiled water to sterilize the needle of the syringe into which she drew alcohol, expelling this and drawing it in again. She had been taught to repeat the operation seven times, but decided that three were now enough. She dropped a morphin tablet into the barrel of the syringe, replaced the needle, with care not to touch its point, and drew hot water into it to dissolve the tablet.

"Now, George, take this and like it." She bared the case's upper arm, cleansed a small area with alcohol, deftly thrust in the needle and with a competent thumb expelled the narcotic.

"Now see if you can't recite something—'Gunga Din' or something." She beamed cordial encouragement upon the case for a moment, then resumed her chair and magazine, heedless of the fevered muttering that continued, nor was she aware when it dwindled and at last ceased. She went through her magazine from cover to cover. Then she yawned whole-heartedly in her boredom.

"What a life!" she murmured, glancing impatiently at the watch on her plump wrist. On the door came a gentle drumming of fingers. She crossed and opened it, narrowly at first, then wider, to a youth in white

who glanced swiftly both ways in the corridor before stepping inside.

"Hello, Babe!" She laid a finger on his lips. He removed this, retaining the hand in his own, but whispered:

"Whose case?"

"Madden's—rush 'pendectomy." He looked with languid interest at the still mound on the bed.

"Good case?"

She shrugged. "Not so good; hasn't reacted right. The old fool let it break. He'll probably kick out before morning. And me needing a couple or three weeks steady. Ain't that just my darned luck? And I could have had a peach of an intestinal flu case, only I thought this would last longer."

The interne was blond and thin and joyous. He wore heavy lenses that gave him a look of constantly pleased astonishment.

"Listen, Babe; I'll step you tonight."

The nurse bridled and with an affectation of hauteur readjusted the lustrous curl that seemed to be truant below the edge of her white cap. "You mean, can you."

"Check!" Still clasping the hand he had seized, he passed an arm about the pliant waist and, instantly tensed, they danced, their feet making only a faint whispering on the polished floor. Twice they went a little way from the door and twice back. They paused, and the interne firmly, at some length, kissed the nurse. There was a pained muttering from the bed.

"We mustn't," she breathed. The interne persisted, but her lips were held away. "He might be going this very minute."

"But we're still alive." She fended him, and he went noiselessly out, turning at the door and seeming to smile at the corner of each eye. "Seven-thirty?"

"If that nutty Doyle's on time for once. And wait till you see my new squirreline coat. It's one swell dish." She kissed the tip of an index finger at him and let the door shut life away from her. She then went to the dresser, took a compact from her bag, dusted her face with powder, and retouched the full lips, the vivid tone of which had been noticeably lowered by the ardent interne. With judicial eyes she studied the restoration, then with a moistened finger-tip drew the dark lock farther below the edge of her cap and cunningly persuaded it to curl again above her temple in a manner of careless escape. A final survey through narrowed lids left her pleased with this device.

She went to take the patient's pulse. About a hundred and thirty, she thought. Just her darned luck if he kicked out. She earnestly hoped he wouldn't. Why hadn't the old fool taken it in time? But if he did stick on, it would mean a good three weeks for her. She became warm with solicitude for the now acquiescent wreck. In all that great city Mr. Carcross had not at this moment a more fervent well-wisher. Why didn't Madden come and have a look? These doctors! All in the day's work with them. They didn't care.

She shrugged off discouragement and went to the bathroom for a cigarette. She needed that smoke, with all her worries. Her brain was quickened. Above a dazzling vision of the new and but partially paid-for coat, she beheld her fool of a patient who had let it go too long and now had to be drained. Fair enough,

if he held on. Three weeks, easy. But what if he didn't? He was batty enough—mice in his cupboard—and his eyes were still dumb.

She broke from a troubled review of the case to wonder about her patient's financial standing, embittered by memories of one long case when she'd got but half her money. This one had come from a swell hotel, all right, but an ambulance case; no clothes or bags or knickknacks to judge him by. He might be some poor small-towner that had got into swell company without any right to. But no good trying to get any information out of him. He still thought he was shooting rabbits or something.

The cigarette was done. Anyway, she'd dance to-night, wearing the wine-colored georgette, she thought. But she'd have to be careful about the stuff Ed would bring. It might be regular alcohol from the surgery or it might be the pink 50 per cent stuff colored with phenol. Putting orange juice into either one didn't seem to make it anything you could fool with. The last time Ed stepped her she'd been woozy the next morning; but at that, who wouldn't, dancing till four A.M. and on the job again at seven-thirty. That was the day she'd dropped a thermometer they used in the sterilizer and had to put up six-fifty; and Sister Acquinata had looked pretty sharp at her. Old gimlet eyes! She'd watch her step this time.

She saw the knob of the door turn and hoped it was Madden at last. But the visitor was another—an elderly, but erect and dapper gentleman with thinning hair, shrewd eyes and shining teeth now exposed in a grin of inquiry. She nodded, and he came in,

closing the door. He glanced at the bed, and once more there was subdued talk above the mangled remains of Mr. Carcross.

"Howdy, Babe. Where's Madden?"

"Not here yet. He ought to be."

"What have you?" His eyes shifted to the bed.

"Rush 'pendectomy. Busted."

"How's it acting?"

"Not too good." They were together now at the foot of the bed. The newcomer, in haste and with a manner somewhat perfunctory, gathered the nurse into a close embrace.

"You darn little home-wrecker you."

"Sh-h-h!" She put a finger on the moving lips.

"Listen, doctor, maybe I won't have this case by tomorrow. What about you?"

He frowned reflectively, idly pretending to nibble at the finger still across his lips. "Let's see; two operations tomorrow. One's only a tonsilectomy, but the other's gallstones. Maybe I can fix you."

"Well, have a heart. I need a couple weeks steady."

"O. K., Babe; get you here or through the registry."

He was out after a brief but tender parting, and the nurse sought her compact. If this one kicked out, Jensen would have another. Still, you couldn't count so much on gallstones, either, and this one would be three or four weeks if it lasted at all. She regarded her charge with new hope. She truly wished him to linger on and on. It was thus, hopefully concerned, that Dr. Madden found her a moment later—loyally on the job. Madden bustled in with his cat tread, going first to scan the chart on the dresser.

"Ho hum!" he murmured not too reassuringly, when he had caught the pulse. The nurse stood attentive, gravely absorbed, quietly efficient. The disturbed patient told them to get the hell out of there, but there was no conviction back of the order.

"He's been awful cursy," said the nurse. The doctor drew up the cover, replaced an arm determined to free itself, and went to wash his hands, stepping in a manner that caused the nurse to murmur "Old Pussyfoot!" apparently to the patient, but really for her own refreshment. The doctor emerged from the bathroom wiping his hands on a towel which he regally dropped when he had done.

"Who's on tonight?" he asked. "I forget."

"Doyle," answered the nurse, wishing to say: "That nutty Doyle." She managed a glance at the mirror to note if the one dark tendril still carelessly escaped the edge of her cap. This Madden, though, was a funny bird; he was too serious, never seeming to notice you or anything about you.

"That's right. Good old Doyle! Doyle keeps 'em stepping when some of the rest of us can't." His glance rested on the patient. "He's a hundred and three and a half now. Tell her to call my house if he goes up more than another degree. And let the bath go for tonight." He seemed to flit through the door on winged feet.

Nurse Ellis sniffed. "If Doyle's going to rob some poor undertaker tonight she'd better be starting, and I don't mean perhaps." It was a breathy murmur, but not devoid of venom. Doyle was late—holding up a party. But while she weighed a chance for another

cigarette, her relief came. Doyle was in the room, only five minutes late after all the dismal forebodings.

"Oh, Ginger, goody! I was afraid you'd stand me up."

"You ought to be. I kept you ten minutes once about a year ago."

"Well, it always seems like always, and tonight I'm invited out social—my favorite boy friend's taking me for a buggy ride, and you know how high-spirited I am; just a bundle of nerves. And say, you ought to have a peek at my grand new squirreline. See me in it and you'd say I was a rich man's toy, just a weak sister that has bartered all for wealth. Well, don't take any wrong tablets—"

Miss Doyle's head tilted in questioning rebuke toward the bed. Miss Ellis permitted herself, not too gracefully, to be recalled. "Oh, Old Man Sunshine there? Well, watch his pulse and his respiration, and he's a hundred and three and a half now and if he gets above a hundred and four and a half call Madden's house; and I bet he does, but I hope he don't. I need work. And I hope he knows what it costs him per day in this lovely room with bath and two lovely nurses. Heaven didn't protect me at all that last long case I had. G'night! See you seven-thirty in the A.M." She danced lightly across the threshold of the open door.

Left alone, Doyle suddenly and without reason saw the bouncing jade magnified and transcendent through a misty golden aura; a prevailing creature, a clouder of reason, a taker and a giver of life, dancing through it, lilting through it with never a fear of hurts. She was life. But was she all of it? Perhaps—even prob-

ably. Certainly enough of life to congeal Ginger Doyle momentarily to a salty pillar of envy. But Ellis didn't at all know her powers, her greatness, her royal and exclusive privileges. Hers to command of life, but she was blind; she saw so little to ask from it. Still, wasn't it well to be blind, even if you could only feel? Doyle shrugged herself from this almost bitter vision and surveyed her own scene with practiced eyes.

She assembled the properties for her night's vigil. The floor lamp was brought beside the big chair. The gaudy magazine of Ellis was removed from the latter—Doyle's finger-tips were deprecativè as she dropped it on the dresser—and she laid her own book—a small but improving volume—on one of the chair's leather arms. She went to the bathroom for a glass of water and brushed away cigarette ashes where Ellis had been careless. Sister Acquinata's lynx eyes would have spotted and magnified these. In all that beautifully pure bathroom she would have heard only the shrieking scandal of cigarette ashes. At the dresser she studied the chart; then went to the bedside of her patient.

He was quiet; his respiration was right—not normal, but not too high. She pushed the shock of grayish hair back from the hot brow and seemed to dream absently a moment above the gaunt face. She felt for a wrist, and her fingers recorded the heart-beats. This was life, too, she remembered. Queer. She'd seen them come and go. She thought of a slangy bit often used by Ellis—she wondered what it was all about. They kept on coming and going, shuddering into life and fading out as this one might. She thought of an enchanting room above—the nursery—where a score or

so of new babies always made a magic of gladness when she entered; or the children's ward on this very floor, only a few doors down the corridor. Maybe she could slip out tonight—"sneak out," Sister Acquinata would bluntly call it—and thrill for a moment. She absently smoothed the hot brow of her patient and as absently murmured, "Yes, he was a dear—a dear." Ben Carcross was still away.

She went to her chair, adjusted the light so that the bed became only a grayish blur in shadow, and took up her small but improving book: "The pleasures of prosperity enhanced, the sorrows of adversity assuaged by the stores of intellectual riches laid up." It was an old-fashioned book.

CHAPTER THREE

*F*ROM under a lifting cloud of ether Ben had for some hours been hovering over the edge of consciousness, and at last his distorted perspective seemed to clear. Riding that cockeyed roan and being stacked at the bottom of Wild Horse Cañon, the cañon had played a dirty trick on him by suddenly becoming boxed at both ends. This was a topographical outrage, but Ben somehow didn't resent it. He could climb the side. No easy climb. The wall was steep to begin with; then, near the top it shelved out and overhung. That was a new one on him. In all his years of range riding he'd never heard of a cañon that closed both ends on you and then stuck a rim out to make it harder.

First, he'd have a drink; his throat was burning. He crawled to the bank of the stream and thrust his face into the swift current, gulping eagerly. But something was wrong; there was the water, plain enough, and there was his open mouth under the surface, but nothing happened. Great guns and panther tracks! He rose to his knees, curled the brim of his hat into a cup as he had often done from his horse when they crossed a stream, and dipped water up; but, though he could get it to his lips, there was no taste. The whole thing was simply hell let out for noon. This was one good cañon to climb right out of.

It wasn't so hard until he reached the upper wall, where it began to overhang. He grabbed a clump of

brush that fetched loose, and there he was falling like a fool. "Now you've done it," he rebuked himself. But instead of falling, he lingered there unaccountably and began to wonder if this wasn't Echo Cañon. But no, it couldn't be, because in Echo there was a hotel beside the lake. Sure, he remembered that, and about the night Curly Hatton took Dutch Annie, the blonde chambermaid, out for a stroll, and Curly, the sentimental cuss, had grabbed her, and she yelled like a panther—yelled her head off—but folks at the hotel thought it was only someone trying out the echo, so Curly kept right on grabbing. Annie split off some good echoes that night, but the laugh was on her.

It seemed that this diversion of his thought to a pleasing reminiscence had kept him from falling. Anyway, his body was pretty light, so he kept on climbing and was almost over the top when a rock gave under his feet, and this time he did fall. He wasn't scared; it was sort of nice, falling. And something would probably happen. Just before he struck the rocky bed of the cañon something did happen, and the falling man all at once became Ben Carcross in a strange room. There was shadow all about, with a shaft of light coming sharply beyond the edge of a screen, and as he listened he could hear the page of a book turned.

"Hello there!" he called. He thought it would be loud, but it was pretty faint. A woman in a white dress came around the screen to him. "Whose house is this?"

She told him.

"Hospital, huh? That's funny." With shut eyes he revolved the amazing disclosure. "I didn't even know I was sick," he presently told her.

The woman left and came back with a glass of water—warm water and he wanted it cold, but he didn't feel able to argue. She thrust an arm back of his head and shoulders and held the glass to his lips. He weakly swallowed twice and lay back on the pillow. There were untoward results which the nurse had apparently foreseen, for she had a towel handy.

"I guess I must be pretty sick," he admitted when the paroxysm had passed. People that went to a hospital mostly died. Probably he would. He was weak as a cat and his side hurt him—rheumatism or something. And he still smelled some powerful medicine like he could remember in that other room. That other room had sure smelled out loud. Just his luck to die away from home. Maybe this woman would be nice and tell him some more. She was wiping his face with a fresh towel—under the eyes where tiny bits of sweat troubled him. He managed a cautious survey of her bending face.

Miss Doyle was later described by Ben Carcross as a fox-haired dame, middle-heighted and looking spring-poor; kind of pinchy, like she was born in a short-feed year. He was subsequently able to elaborate this sketch, but it sufficed for the moment. Nor was Ben Carcross to the girl more than a drab and too familiar presentation of poor human frailty. It was not for Ginger Doyle to divine that because of this barely alive wreck she would one day flaunt a wedding ring, hers only by right of purchase. Nothing of this; no glamorous foreboding disturbed her professional routine at this beginning encounter of an association to endure with all manner of guilty deception.

He was ready to extort from her the blunt truth about his approaching demise when she came back to insert a glass tube into his mouth and to feel the rapid pulse. She was a nice, quiet girl, he thought, and he mustn't impose on her. When the glass was withdrawn and while she read it, "I don't believe I got your name," he said. She told him Doyle—Miss Doyle.

"Well, Miss Doyle, it was mighty kind of you to sit here till I woke from my nap, but I'm all right now and I'll let you run along. I hope I'll see you again."

She pushed the grayish shock of hair back from his forehead; to his embarrassment, she saw. The strongly boned face was racked and drawn, lined with exhaustion, the mouth lax. The lids fluttered open and regarded her with a sort of shamed appeal. It was a kind, believing face, with a broad but gentle mouth, so with some tact she explained that she was at leisure for the evening.

He was instantly suspicious. "You going to set up with me all night?"

She nodded.

This was certainly serious. People were pretty bad—already next to dying—when they had to be set up with; at least in the cow country. He felt himself losing strength and groped for the hand that had pushed his hair back.

"Well, I s'pose it's the one-way trail for me, sister."

She beamed encouragement. "Of course not!" But that was what they always told dying people.

"Sure I'm not dead on the vine?"

"Indeed not! A great strong man like you."

Trying to fool him, she was, but it was his instinct

to be polite and go out with no fuss. He'd let her think she had fooled him. "Yes, you can bet all the rice in China I'm a strong man. Just for a minute there I thought God might be goin' to tidy me away, but I'll soon be hard to curry."

"You'll be up and romping," she soothed him.

"This wouldn't ever have happened if Doc Snell had been here." He was sorry for Doc's sake, as well as his own.

"Dr. Madden is very well thought of," she submitted.

"So he's the one that got me into this jam?" Served him right, getting sick in a strange hotel in a strange town. Fluttering lids once more shut out the weary eyes. No good fighting death if death was riding you. No dish-ragging or sun-fishing could spill that old boy out of the saddle. You couldn't even make him grab leather. Suddenly he was conscious of wanting more light. Not so easy to go out in the dark.

"Could you turn on a lot of lights?" he asked. Miss Doyle obliged.

"That's better," he thanked her. "I may keep my eyes shut, but I like to know it's there. More friendly, I guess, right now." He lay still a long time. Then the nurse sitting by him became aware of the tired voice in a husky whisper:

*"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep. . . ."*

When he had finished, she put an encouraging hand over one of his.

"We might have a song," he suggested. She sang

very softly, little bits she remembered. At "You tell me your dream and I'll tell you mine," she felt him relax. Her patient had sunk into a fathomless sea of sleep. Sleep had come to him—that little death of the night.

Miss Doyle noted the lighter breathing and went to shut off the glare of light. But instead of resuming her book, she was restless, pacing the two rugs, with care to stay off the hard floor. She was struggling with her conscience, as she invariably did in these middle hours of her night. Conscience had never won—not when her charge of the moment slumbered as soundly as now. Calling herself a bad girl—prowling out that way—she took a quick survey of the corridor. It was vacant; not even a signal light glowing above any of the doors. She stepped cautiously as far as the third door on her left. It stood open on a narrow hall between the two children's wards, and as usual the nurse in charge, a trainer, had fallen asleep, head on arms, arms on an opened *Materia Medica*, a volume that seldom failed this reader as a sedative.

The girl's heavily rimmed spectacles gleamed under the low-hung light, clasped by one of the stilled hands. This was inviting to Miss Doyle, but it was too easy. Located where she was now, she could make the children's ward any time. She held her breath a moment, a finger on her lips in guilty resolve, then sped over the shining tiles to the next stairway, pattered up that and came breathless to the door of the hospital nursery. She looked in and stood entranced at the room's unfoldment; rows of new or fairly new babies, all blanketed in tiny basketlike beds. The light was dim, but she peered intently and could make out fuzzy heads,

with here and there a fat, creased wrist with its doubled fist. She thought she could hear a muted chorus of breathing. But she did hear unmistakable high voices from the supply room. She opened the door of this and was greeted by the three girls—nurses in training—grouped about a table drinking coffee from a thermos.

"Hello, Ginger; have a sandwich."

"No, thanks."

"Cup of coffee?"

"Well." A filled cup was handed her. She put sugar into it from a package on the table, and one of the girls poured in cream. The guest began to stir this, but set the cup down at an infant's cry near at hand.

"Oh!" She hurried across the room to a swinging baize-covered door and pushed it open to reveal the author of the cry—newly born and snarling in vicious protest. A stout and not too amiable-looking graduate nurse held the noisy creature and was smearing olive oil over its pink surface.

"Oh, Myra, isn't he lovely!"

The nurse sniffed. "You can have him."

"If I only could!" Miss Doyle clasped her hands at the breath-taking suggestion and came closer. "Lovely, lovely!" she breathed, ecstatic.

"He looks like a monkey, and you know it," retorted the nurse. "And you never saw one that didn't."

"But look at his hair!" It was dark and plenteous. Miss Doyle had chosen the one item beyond criticism.

"Well, he won't keep that long—and look at his monkey legs and his monkey stomach. Squally brat, I'll say."

But the squall was music to Ginger Doyle, and she found the face funnily appealing, even with its violent contortions of rage, the indignant eyes tightened to slits. He seemed to begin his cries with a vast intention, then find himself without the breath to finish them. Yet he constantly began. Miss Doyle listened raptly while the olive oil was applied to the squirming figure.

And suddenly her thoughts went out to the mother lying somewhere below, weak but happy now, all her racking torment so soon forgotten; though longing she must be for the feel of this mite, now so casually handled by an indifferent nurse, being slimed with oil and labeled like something in a factory. That was pretty fierce, if you asked Ginger Doyle.

Somewhere, of course, in the ordained course of nature there would be a father, but he was honored with no place in Doyle's thoughts as she greedily watched. Had his existence occurred to her now, she would have shrugged his dismissal as a minor and objectionable mechanism that had served its purpose. Fathers, to Doyle's way of thinking, were negligible if necessary evils. The best a father ever had from her was a patronizing indifference barely off contempt; and even this formal acknowledgment only if he came on tiptoes, whispering with fulsome reverence, and didn't try to pretend that he, too, had suffered. She had seen that sort of sniveling hypocrite more than once and had been harsh enough to him.

Now, to her delight, she was let affix identification labels to this lusty newcomer. First, a narrow band of adhesive tape put around the tiny wrist, the inscrip-

tion on this being: "Baby Judson, Room 408"; then a second patch of tape in the middle of his powerful back. This read, "Baby Judson, 1192 Gr. April 9th, Dr. Ledyard." Doyle thought this precaution was pretty silly, because she didn't see how anyone could become confused about the identities of babies, no matter how vast their number.

"Now, Mr. Judson," scolded the nurse, "you quit it and go to sleep." Doyle followed Myra into the nursery and watched him put to bed in one of the little baskets. He was quiet now, staring up at the two nurses with wide, inscrutable eyes. Doyle believed he was thinking wonderful things, but she didn't say this because she knew Myra would laugh at her. Myra had read all the books and didn't believe any of that nonsense about the thoughts of new babies.

They returned to the supply room where the others lingered over their coffee. Doyle's coffee was cold, but she was too excited for coffee.

"Any more tonight?" she wanted to know. They told her Dr. Hartley was now in the ward with a baby case; a slow case, not so good to listen to.

"Beast!" exclaimed Doyle, meaning inconsistently to denounce him who should presently become a father. She detected the inconsistency, reflecting that the very choice infant she had just seen put to bed for the first time would perhaps some day himself be a father. She puzzled about this, her eyes brooding above the cold coffee as she absently stirred it, oblivious to the chatter of the graduate nurse and the trainers.

Then from the nursery came a half-strangled squawk of protest. They all listened. Doyle was sure

she recognized the voice of him they had just bedded. A treble yell blended with the squawk, and presently, as if a leader's baton had evoked it, a full-throated symphony swelled.

"That little rowdy set the bunch off," declared Myra, attacking a new sandwich.

"Wouldn't you know it?" demanded a young trainer, putting hands to her ears and frowning in comic dismay. But Doyle thought it was grand music. She was expert in this species of orchestration. She could distinguish moans of pleading and hearty bellows of truculence, scared little whimpers and tired whines, puny coughs, funny little snorts of rage. But at the very height of the ecstasy she was recalled to her mission in life. She must be on her own job again.

"Thanks for the coffee," she said, and rushed out.

"Nutty," observed the nurse to the trainers. "She never touched her coffee, and now she'll probably sneak down to the children's ward and start something there. I never did see such a girl. God help her cases when she can mother around a baby."

On the floor below, Doyle was indeed at that moment considering a furtive prowling into the children's ward; but that could wait; she would look at her man first. She went on to her own door as a hurrying nurse passed.

"How's Hartley's case coming, Mary?"

"Slow," the nurse called back. "He just sent down for another interne to scrub up."

"Brute!" Miss Doyle viciously muttered, meaning thus to characterize a legally blameless father.

She found her patient still sleeping. As she took his

wrist to catch the pulse his eyes opened and he smiled up at her.

"That's good," he whispered, and the eyes closed again, the smile staying a moment before the mouth again became firm. Fresh from those babies upstairs, Miss Doyle thought this man was much of a baby himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT SEVEN-THIRTY Ginger Doyle was relieved by Nurse Ellis, still in the springtime of her beauty, though heavy-eyed and inclined to be morose. She deposited an aspirin tablet on the tip of her tongue and swallowed water in a feverish manner. She then confided to Doyle that she expected to die on her feet within an hour. But she wanted no flowers or any display. Just a simple ceremony with a few close friends in.

Doyle wasn't cast down by this information. "You had your fun; now pay for it."

"You said it, darling. But I'm still having it. I can hear that orchestra right now. 'Fair young nurse ends all.'" She grimaced in despair.

Ben Carcross surprisingly awoke to a world he had thought himself about to leave. A woman was fussing around his bed; not the pleasant one of the night before; a darker, shorter one that looked sort of cross at him. She took his pulse and came with the glass thing to put in his mouth. He was tired of that. The other girl had worked the same thing on him. He tried to fight off the tube, but she was firm.

"Take it and like it," she ordered. He became docile. "And if you dare to chew that glass I'll tell teacher on you, so help me Hannah!" He could only glare at her. "Now, Chester! Be nice, and mother will bring you a bunch of pansies."

"Pashies," he bitterly managed.

"That's right—strike a defenseless girl!"

"Didn't!"

"Well, you wanted to."

This was so close to the truth that he merely closed his lips more tightly about the glass. He was hurting. And this coffee-eyed little frisk—a scamper she was—didn't seem to care. "You're just a trouble sign," he informed her after the tube had been removed.

"I've been told different."

"I'm going to get out of here."

"You wouldn't fool me, would you?"

"If I had my pants you'd see me splitting the wind for home."

"I wouldn't; I wouldn't look." She giggled at this happy retort. The old hick was making her feel better.

"Now, listen, I don't have to stay here another day, do I?"

"No fooling!"

"And all night again?"

"I hope to tell you, brother." He peered up at her with anguished and reproachful eyes. "Now quit pouting, and I'll give you a nice bath."

"Yes, you will—"

"And change your sheets." This was outrageous, shameful, but the hardened woman proceeded to make good her threat. He groaned when she touched his side.

"Don't think I'm doing this for fun," she told him. He hated the bath more and more as it progressed; this girl was certainly a sopper.

"You ought to marry some good man and get out of this trade," he painfully advised her.

"Yeah!" She was scouring his back now. "Two or three of 'em told me that lately, but they seemed to have underfed wives somewhere already."

"Well, you needn't be so rough; that side hurts like sin."

"Listen, my dear. See this pin?" She raised a dripping hand to indicate the small enameled pin on her shoulder. There was a red cross at its center. "I slaved three years for that—slaved in the mines—and don't think I didn't learn over and over how to give a bath to someone like you." She added a final indignity; combing his hair in a strange way, sweeping it straight back from his forehead instead of parting it.

"You know you could have a perfectly adorable wave if you'd do it like that."

She was sure a light-minded pullet. Then all at once he knew he was about to die. This wasn't the familiar pain in his side. This was one vast intolerable pain seeming to be made of a thousand lesser pains all through his middle. They were tearing him apart.

"Ouch! For Criminy's sake!" he gasped between two spasms. But the nurse beamed upon him with enraging cheerfulness.

"Now don't take on; it's only gas."

"You—" he ominously began, but broke off manfully. "Only gas! I wish you had it."

"Naughty, naughty!" she chid, and lightly caroled, "She's the sweetheart of six other guys," as she passed between the bed and the bathroom.

It was at this writhing moment for the patient that the large and cheerful Dr. Madden briskly entered.

"Ah, good morning! And how are we this morn-

ing?" The patient glared at this offensively vital intruder. Where did he get that "we" stuff?

"Here's your nice doctor man," said the nurse.

His nice doctor! So this was the man who had slashed away right and left. He grunted a greeting. Miss Ellis was cheerful. "We're fine, doctor. Perfectly fine. A few little gas pains."

There it was again, too much of it. The patient exploded. "We're having gas pains? 'We,' hell! You people talk like Lindbergh. I want you to know I'm having these gas pains—just me—and they ain't little. They're big gas pains."

"He's been awfully trying," explained the nurse in low, sweet tones.

"Nothing to be alarmed about in the least, I assure you," put in the cheerful doctor. "Just the usual thing. We always expect them. Now let's have a little look at you."

Ben didn't believe him. After he'd died there like a dog they might wish they'd acted different. That little look the doctor was having hurt him in a new place, but seemed to gratify the too easily pleased doctor; he learned that he must be flat on his back there for two weeks; perhaps longer. He was bluntly assured that he had been lucky to pull through at all.

"It was simply touch and go with you," the large man said.

That sounded pretty silly. "I bet Doc Snell would have fixed me in jig time," he stubbornly countered.

"Perhaps," pleasantly admitted the doctor, and finished his examination without further comment. Ben was pleased to note that a mention of Doc Snell's

name had shut him up. He went to wash his hands while the nurse gathered bits of gauze, a basin, and the forceps he had used. He came from the bathroom, wiping his huge hands on a towel that he dropped where he stood. The cuss was used to being waited on, Ben thought. He went to the dresser for a final glance at the chart.

"Mind you, I don't promise anything, but three weeks ought to see you stepping." He came to take the pulse.

Ben's former suspicions were now confirmed, for this so-called doctor merely held his wrist awhile and seemed to think of something else; never looked at his watch the way Doc Snell did. Doc would get a good laugh out of that if he lived to tell him. He'd bet this lad couldn't bring a sick bull around the way Doc Snell had that time Majestic Folly was taken so bad. Doc had simply come to the ranch and sat up all night with the animal and a quart of whisky, and saved the ranch four thousand dollars.

"And you have two of our best nurses," said the doctor, dropping the wrist carelessly. "They'll do all anyone could do for you."

Ben reflected that the fox-haired one of last night had been sort of human, had a mothering way with her, but this one, standing here now like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, was just a crazy-headed little scamper. The nerve of her, calling them "our" gas pains!

"And haven't you some friends or relatives you wish to communicate with?"

This might be a way out; he'd get his clothes from

the hotel and hop a train some night when they least expected it. He gave a telephone number. The doctor was to tell a Mr. Melcher to beat it up there with his stuff from the hotel and a lot of cash—quite a lot. The doctor brisked out on this, left him to the mercy of the Grim Reaper and a nurse who began to sing something silly.

Miss Ellis had been a little cheered by Ben's confident demand for money. Maybe he was all right even if he did look like the janitor of a courthouse over in New Jersey or one of those places.

"Can't I get shaved here?" he savagely demanded, running a hand over his two days' growth of beard.

"Well, just this once," she told him, "but don't ever ask me again."

Her charge peered up at her with keen disrelish. "You're just a frisky scamper," he observed; "just green stuff, and green stuff never has any strength till it joints."

"There you go spoiling my whole day! Now don't be a crosspatch, and after a while I'll let you have the nicest lunch."

That wouldn't be so bad, he thought. A good thick steak and some fried potatoes. "All right, sister; I thought at first you must have been dropped when you was a baby, but I guess you mean well."

"You know it," said Miss Ellis warmly.

An aged and morose barber came to shave him with the dulllest razor Ben had ever submitted to. "He thinks I'm dead already and can't feel anything," he remarked to the nurse, who giggled.

"You get one over now and then," she encouraged him. The barber shaved relentlessly on.

When the promised lunch came, Ben was aghast at its limitations—a swallow of tea and about two swallows of what the nurse inanely called broth. Neither had any kick. He suspected that he couldn't have done much to a steak, but he wasn't going to let a smarty nurse know that. He stared into the hand mirror she had brought him. "This hutch has certainly got a hard shrink on me. I look like something that was winter-killed. And no wonder—I'm starved."

Miss Ellis projected her head from the doorway of the bathroom. Above it, inside, floated a filmy rack of cigarette smoke. "I can tell why you behave like human beings. I don't have to read any three-dollar book about it."

"Starve me!" he bitterly complained.

"Listen, Cousin Hector; you simply got to starve for a few days. My Lord, but you must be a pest in your home circle. Don't you know you're in luck to have any works at all left in you, say nothing of a stomach? Now laugh that off."

"Doc Snell would have—"

"You and Doc Snell! I bet he's a horse doctor."

"Yes, and a darned good one, if you want to know it."

"I don't." She relinquished the cigarette and came out to him. "You're in luck to be alive and scrappy. You had a hard operation that probably wouldn't have been any good at all to you half an hour later—a busted appendix—and that's nothing to sneeze at, unless you happen to have hay fever."

"Someone's smoking around here. I want to."

"It must have been that Heinie barber. You can't smoke, so don't tease. If you don't pipe down I'll jab

you in the arm again and let you go off shooting rabbits."

"I'm just talking," he muttered defensively.

"You and me both, brother." She yawned richly and slumped into the capacious easy chair. "Say, listen, if I look unconscious for a minute, don't you be alarmed. I'm just having a fainting spell."

"Listen yourself, lady; you can go unconscious any time without alarming me. You'll have to think up another one."

"Slam!" exclaimed Miss Ellis. The old boy had a real line of his own. Surprise you sometimes.

She was aroused half an hour later by a sharp knocking at the door. Her tried senses alert, she went, bright-eyed, to open it upon a youngish man of surpassing beauty. A super-idol of the screen he might have been. He was blond and tall and just rugged enough to atone for his almost too perfect features—an ideal Miss Ellis had often been inspired to picture for her very own after an intent study of hat and collar advertisements. He carried the perfect hat with a shining stick and gloves, and an expensive light topcoat was thrown across an arm to reveal him superbly tailored, meticulously pressed and creased, the perfect collar of dull finish confining a cravat that had cost, to the shrewd appraisal of Miss Ellis, at least seven-fifty; she mentally named the shop it came from.

Miss Ellis appraised the visitor item by item, from the adorable glossy wave of his hair to the correct spats. As she came from sleep with a mind freshly blank, this resplendent stranger was deeply etched upon it, more deeply than the lines formerly graven by in-

ternes or practicing surgeons or strolling bond salesmen.

And all this Miss Ellis knew even before the stranger demanded, in a voice hushed but vibrant—his wonderful eyes searching, she felt, her very soul—"Mr. Carcross!"

Was that all? This perfect being, a member of clubs, probably of that fast hunting set on Long Island, merely asked for the battered wreck she nursed. She had suspected him of mistaking this room for another; had even beheld herself setting him right, guiding him down the corridor with grave, faintly smiling, yet wistful assurances that it was no trouble at all. You never could tell. Things happened quickly in her experience, and anything might have happened in that imagined chatty stroll to the right room. If this refulgent being had been the sort to say something about a party that night—or any night—it would have been seriously considered by a girl in her right mind.

She did the inevitable, and began to wonder and wonder when the newcomer effusively, not to say obsequiously, greeted the man on the bed.

"Well, well, well, Mr. Carcross! This was certainly a surprise to the office. What do you mean by deserting us? Well, well, well!" He surveyed the room. "Not so bad, though; nice sunny room, a nice nurse." His lively eyes ever so casually bathed Miss Ellis with their splendor.

"Nice nurse!" Miss Ellis would rather he hadn't said it in just that offhand way. And to her further displeasure her patient did not seem overwhelmed by this superb visitor. He acted grumpy; the old grouch

not only shut off a lot of thoughtful inquiries by his visitor—into which the nurse could have been gracefully drawn—but when asked, “And how are we progressing?” the old boy actually growled, “Don’t begin that. I’ve had enough ‘we’ talk this morning. This trouble is all mine.”

“Priceless!” the visitor exclaimed, and laughed tactfully. Indeed he was always tactful, ingratiating, one might say, throughout the tragically curtailed interview. The old man did practically all the talking while this Greek god merely listened and smiled or amazingly said, “Yes, sir; yes, sir, I understand,” actually saying “sir” to the old hick. He handed over letters and what Miss Ellis knew to be cablegrams; also a flat packet of yellow-backed bills with a paper band about it.

But this didn’t satisfy the patient; he wished shortly to be told if the doctor hadn’t mentioned clothes. The visitor admitted that belongings at the hotel had been mentioned, but he hadn’t stopped for clothes in a matter that might be life or death. And to this courteous explanation, all the old grouch could say was, “I want my pants. I don’t feel right without ’em.”

“To be sure, to be sure,” agreed his caller. “I know just how you feel, Mr. Carcross; and what else can we send you? Of course I’m only one of our vice-presidents; W. J. himself will come up when he gets a moment off. He was in conference when I left, but especially said I was to get you everything.”

“‘Only’ a vice-president!” Miss Ellis marveled at the modesty of it.

“Now let’s see, we must liven up this charming little

den a bit." His glance sparkingly roved. "You will want flowers—some of those priceless daffodils, I'd say. And how about a radio to help while away the tedious moments? That will be priceless."

"I want my pants," the patient gruffly retorted.

"Oh, naturally! But the radio will be company."

"All my things from the hotel, mind you. I left some money on the bureau and my new watch and my keys and my glasses and my fountain-pen and my—"

"Trust me, Mr. Carcross." The caller draped the expensive topcoat gracefully across an arm, took up the perfect hat, the shining stick and practically new gloves, and had begun a respectful bow of adieu, when he was halted by a sort of yelp.

"Hey, wait! One thing more. I want a good barber up here every morning—the best you can find in New York—one that's got all the do-dads, like that fellow in the hotel."

"I will see to it in person, Mr. Carcross," Melcher assured the patient earnestly, and concluded his leave-taking.

Miss Ellis went to open the door for him and even stepped outside. There might have been a moment of confidential talk about the interesting and delightful Mr. Carcross. But the caller, with a murmur of thanks, pattered swiftly down the corridor.

Returning to the bedside, she found herself about to ask in wheedling tones, "And how are we now after seeing our lovely friends?" She checked this because the curious old gentleman looked crossly busy with his mail, holding the sheets of a letter almost at arm's length from his eyes. Instead of speaking, she revolved

a crank at the foot of the bed, raising his head and shoulders, then thrust a pillow beneath his knees, "to keep you from sliding," she meekly explained when he growled at her.

"What a pleasant gentleman that was! Melcher was his name?"

"Yeah, Melcher or Mushwush. Something funny."

"I suppose of course he's married." Miss Ellis looked brightly conversational. Her patient opened one eye to regard her with mild interest.

"What you want to know a question like that for?" The eye closed. "That gent could be married a-plenty and I wouldn't know it."

"A real vice-president," murmured the nurse incitingly.

"I guess so. He seems to rate about a two spot in that Imperial Trust Company."

Miss Ellis was hurt. A two-spot. Surely it couldn't be that this distinguished person, so beautiful and refined-looking, was merely a drip. Of course you couldn't always tell. There was the one that looked nearly as good that she and a girl friend had met one night, bubbling with talk about his swell apartment, his limousine and his steam yacht and about a couple of loose three-carat stones he was going to have set in rings for them; but he let the other man pay for the gin and later had been pinched by the narcotic squad. Life was certainly fierce for a working girl.

Her patient, arousing as if from a troubled reverie, wished to be told what it meant to "shop" anything. "She says in this letter from Paris that she shopped an ermine coat. And she says it's a very clever garment."

"That means she's bought one." Miss Ellis became animated.

"A clever garment." Mr. Carcross pondered the phrase. "Sounds like it could jump through a hoop or do tricks or something."

"Why, Mr. Carcross, aren't you the tease!"

"Her other letter says she got a wonderful bargain in a string of pearl beads from a Russian lady that had them from the Czar's private jewelry."

"How perfectly wonderful!"

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, it's the first time pearls ever happened to this family. She did get a diamond straddle bug to pin on her chest before she went to Europe, but it wasn't any bargain that I could see."

Miss Ellis was for the moment unequal to speech. And she had been afraid that this dear old gentleman might not be so hot; not even good for paltry nurse hire. She wondered who "she" was. It seemed a bit prying to ask him, even after he added, "She's gone hay-wire. All of 'em gone hay-wire." He appeared to doze on this, and Miss Ellis, murmuring, "Soft cushions!" to herself, went to manage an exhilarating cigarette in the bathroom. She might have known from the first that the old bird wouldn't have had a private room with a bath if he hadn't been pretty warm.

She'd certainly have an earful of hot dirt for Doyle that night. Doyle would get a nice boot out of it. And the patient was so easy to get, now that she had a few clues. From the screen experience of Miss Ellis he was, clearly enough, one of those strong silent men who do big things in a big way and have Wall Street at their mercy. She found herself wondering if he

wouldn't have a wayward son, the way they always did have on the screen; good stuff in him but a gin head at first, until finally he would tire of night life and make good out in the great open spaces under the influence of a beautiful young nurse who administered to him in the alcoholic ward of this very hospital. It was a lovely dream—still, you never could tell.

She was recalled to duty and groped a way out of the faery realm she had builded. The aged and delightful Mr. Carcross who, she was now sure, had a heart of gold beneath the rough exterior that Wall Street knew, wished to be read to because that fool had forgot to send up his glasses. Miss Ellis forgave the blighting reference to a vice-president.

"I'll shuck this paper and you read out loud," he directed, handing her what she saw to be the Branlock Advertiser. "Begin at the top and read every single thing. Don't skip."

Miss Ellis glanced at City Jottings. It hardly seemed to be the matter that a Wall Street magnate would crave. The first item occupied a line:

"Measles are a popular ailment hereabouts." Her patient was pleasantly impressed. "Well, well, just think of that, now." She continued. "Mr. and Mrs. Clayte Tarpey Sundayed here with her parents."

"Clayte Tarpey in town, hey?" satisfied the listener as a comment.

"Mrs. Gus Pringle is laid up with a broken wrist cranking the flivver last Tuesday A.M. Hard luck, Sister Pringle, but progressing nicely at this writing, under the care of P. J. Snell, M.D., office in Empire Block over City Pharmacy."

"Doc Snell will soon have her mended."

The reader continued: "Brad Bailey drove in a bunch of choice two-year-old stuff Thursday and loaded on Number 6. He reports a good stand of feed over Bear Paw way."

From the bed came: "I told Brad a thousand times, if I told him once: 'Sell off your yearlings and hold back the top of your heifers to replace your dry cows.'"

The reader sighed. She could have picked livelier reading matter, and it didn't seem the right stuff for a big operator who held Wall Street in the hollow of his hand.

"Mrs. Peru Jackson and family visited our metropolis Saturday P.M. They were running one to a bunch when seen by ye Ed. on business and pleasure bent." The listener chuckled wryly at this.

"I'll bet Bernie Jackson was bent on getting his spring drinking done up."

The reader clicked her tongue in deprecation. "Ora Bartle is down with mumps at his mother's home, and he's riding forty hard. What detained you, Ora? P. J. Snell, M.D., office in Empire Block over City Pharmacy, in daily attendance."

The indisposition of Mr. Bartle seemed to find the listener callous.

"Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Hartop entertained Saturday eve in honor of their daughter Maude's graduation from a city business college, a sit-still party for the old folks and dancing for the youngsters, with choice refreshments served at a buffet supper. A grand time was reported. Maudie has accepted a situation at the

B. & J. Creamery, and will be an ornament of our younger set." This report animated the listener:

"Well I'll be darned! Little snub-nosed Maudie Hartop! You wouldn't believe it, but I remember when her folks got married. Neither of 'em had much, so they decided Mat should get a good tailor-made suit to get married in—one that would last forever for weddings and funerals and parties—all such blow outs—and she'd make-up something cheap. She did so, and got through on six-eighty. Mat's suit set him back seventy-five; and the paper described her outfit for half a column—mentioned every single ruffle and dew-dad on it—but when it came to Mat's outfit, that ran into real money, it just said that the groom was dressed in conventional black. Wouldn't that get you?"

His listener clicked a sympathetic tongue and murmured, "Priceless!" after the manner of the late Mr. Melcher.

"But you ought to hear Mat tell it."

"How I wish I could!" Miss Ellis sighed wistfully. Her patient was no longer a grouch; radiant now, boyish.

"Nothing like getting back inside your own stakes, back among old friends of your home country," he told her.

She was reporting two-weeks-old quotations on western beef cattle when relief came with the promised radio. This was installed by a competent and romantic-looking young man who obviously prolonged his task because of the near presence of Miss Ellis. From a conference with this personable expert she was

recalled by arriving flowers, the priceless daffodils, a package of magazines and, a moment later, a bit of modest luggage from the swell hotel.

She procured the reading glasses, and her patient began to read over for himself the gossipy Branlock Advertiser, so that the young radio expert was enabled to leave with a telephone number warranted to evoke Miss Ellis any time she was off duty and not dated. Ben was drawn from the dear reminders of his home-town paper to find the radio a going concern.

"You are listening to Burnheim Brothers Vesper Hour," he heard, in a voice nobly resonant. "Remember where you can obtain America's best-knit jacket value." Followed the flat tinkle of a banjo, abetted by instruments of wind and percussion, notably a hoarse-toned and apparently unguided saxophone, in a jerky and reasonless rhythm. Ben thought it was terrible; still, the scamper seemed to find music in it.

"Wouldn't you know that was the Melody Madcaps?" she demanded, feet stirring to the rhythm. "Crazy Elbows! Wouldn't that make you roll back the rugs? Or maybe I can get you the High-life Hots." She went to twirl something on the machine, eliciting a jumble: "The Fordham Soda Water Works want you to think before you drink"; a blithe ballad, "I hope I don't meet Mollie on the day I marry Flo"; "The home of lucky wedding rings"; "Society hard candies; the utmost in confections are ready for your dream house"; "Is your nightwear styled for comfort?" The operator listened appraisingly to each outbreak, passed on to "When baby fingers go mussing through

your hair," warbled by a tenor too obviously in tears; hurried past "Pete's special cold suggestions" to halt with the undeniable High-life Hots.

"Here they are, right at the start of Sugar Face," the delighted Miss Ellis announced. To Ben it sounded like the other one—equally objectionable. He'd rather be hearing again about toiletries or the right tooth-paste.

He pretended to sleep and Miss Ellis thoughtfully reduced the pestilent uproar to "When day is done and shadows fall."

CHAPTER FIVE

MADDEN came, finding Miss Ellis busy with the priceless daffodils. The patient hadn't seemed to care greatly for this flower. He said they were too fussy. If the room had to be trashed up with flowers, he would prefer something that looked as if it grew out-of-doors. These looked like they had been made in a tin shop. With the air of one gifted in the ways of silent suffering, Miss Ellis removed the bowl of golden bloom from the bedside table to the dresser.

The patient was grouchy again with Dr. Madden; kind of vicious, in fact, merely because the doctor hurt him a little while doing something needful.

"We got an outlaw horse, a cockeyed roan that rolled on me once. Hurt me just the way you did then. The boys call him Doctor."

"How does he get that name?" Madden politely wished to know.

"Oh, because he's killed so many men."

The doctor was above noticing this, but a moment later the patient emitted a wholesouled "Ouch!" for which no apology was tendered him. The doctor was able to give assurance on leaving, however, that he was doing as well as could be expected, though compelling the inference that expectation had no really free play.

Ben didn't care. He had his glasses back and again refreshed himself with Branlock morsels. He was thus occupied when Miss Doyle came at seven-thirty.

Miss Ellis at once manipulated the radio into the Personality Twins Half Hour of Mirth and Melody, sponsored, through a bull-voiced announcer, by someone in furniture who promised to make your dining-room a more fitting background for your hospitality—"Yours today. A year to pay." She then pantomimed Miss Doyle to the bathroom, closed the door and regaled her with the day's distractions, all of them seeming to emphasize the hitherto unsuspected importance of their charge. She began with a word-painting of the spectacular but belittled vice-president. "Hot, what I mean; coaled up! Personality plus! Not a day over thirty-five and a genuine vice-president—and you'd have thought he was an office boy the way old Santa Claus in there ritzed him. Honest, Ginger, he was one that would simply sweep any girl off her feet."

Doyle patted a plump shoulder of Miss Ellis and called her, "Little old Good Will to Men."

"And a clever ermine coat shopped in Paris and a pearl necklace shopped from a Russian princess right out of the Czar's private jewels! Now, what do you know about that, my wild Irish rose?"

"I knew all the time he was a dear."

"Sure, you always do. But while I'm thinking he must be the wolf of Wall street, what does he do but have me read a hicktown paper, all about Mr. Whoosis having a few measles, and somebody else pulling a party and selling off his heifers. Had me read it to him, then read it himself; and now he's giving it a third over. Ermine coat and pearls and Paris, France, and him so simple—now I ask you!"

Miss Doyle remained unruffled under what had been

a tirade; even after a final disclosure that the radio had been put in by a swell-looking boy. "You poor little party hound!" was her dismissal of Miss Ellis, evoking, as a good-night retort:

"Oh, not so poor!"

Ben Carcross had explored his newspaper to the last precious advertisement, the smallest-typed tax notice. He could have recited from memory the choice bits; although the glow induced by them still lingered, it was fading. He felt stampede again. But now his clothes were in the middle drawer, and he had money. He saw himself leaving a train at Branlock, getting into a car and streaking it for the ranch. He'd put her down to the floor board and go a pace that would make the telegraph poles look like fence staves.

"Fill up with Essdee oil and let your engine be our salesman," wheedled the radio, and went on to sing that if you wanted the rainbow you must have rain.

"Fair enough," commented the listener, watching the nurse, who had come back. Peacefuller than the other one, he thought. She had a lot of happy teeth and sort of hungry-looking eyes.

"Hello, buckskin!" he greeted her. She smiled and came to put a hand on his forehead.

"I know how hard it is." Her hand was cool over his tired eyes.

This was something like a nurse; he ventured to tell her about those hellish gas pains. "I thought they'd hurt me to death. Seemed like they'd simply bust through every rib I own."

She knew about gas pains, and didn't try to tell him they were nothing. This was a girl you could talk

to. So he reached for the Advertiser and his glasses and read bits to her, and explained all about them. He told her about the ranch, that many-acred barony; the flat green meadows he had marked with his dominion so many years ago.

She had never seen a ranch, she said—only a garden. Once when she was a little girl her family had a garden, and her father was interested in it at first, but after the seeds didn't come up right he called it hell's half-acre.

They had a vegetable garden at the ranch, Ben said, and a dairy herd, and a spring-house to keep the milk in, and they churned butter. And there were chickens. Did she ever know how funny young chickens were, the way about a hundred of them would follow you all over the place, no matter where you went, if you were the one that fed them? And had she ever watched a young half-feathered rooster, looking sort of scraggled and moth-eaten, give his first crow? He'd get it out all right, then look scared of it himself, not having known that his voice was changing.

And old Snooper, the dog—a funny time he had with two coyotes one night. They'd come up close to the ranch buildings and yip at him, and he'd chase 'em a ways, but not far, because he was too wise; then they'd come yipping back at him. And one of these times when Snooper was backing up he slipped a hind paw into a can that had been opened and the tin points caught him and he lost his head—thought another coyote had sneaked around behind and caught him by the foot. Snooper would always remember that night. He yelled bloody murder and crawled way back under

the bunk-house, still thinking one of these devils had him by the foot. The coyotes, of course, had sat there in the moonlight and laughed their heads off at the old fool. Coyotes had sense—more than some folks.

A long silence, but a good friendly silence.

And if he was at the ranch tonight, the first thing he'd have a long powwow with Art Dugdale, his foreman—Art had a kid nine years old and would whale him good if he caught him swearing on a Sunday—and after he'd got caught up with things on the ranch, he and Art would likely have a game of cribbage.

"Cribbage!" echoed Miss Doyle, and their eyes widened hopefully on each other. Miss Doyle slipped out to borrow cards and a cribbage board, and they played five joyous games. He beat her the odd game, but by no wide margin. She had coyote sense herself, that woman.

When sleep didn't come to him she worked the radio until it played the piano, a fancy piece by someone the velvet-voiced announcer called Showpang, who seemed to be employed by the Considerate Dye Works—"We clean 'em clean; as good as the best, better than the rest." Then she found some nice soft songs. This nurse didn't seem to care any more than he did for the noisy ones that would make you roll the rugs back.

"Doyle"—evidently part Irish, but part coyote, with tempered steel for a backbone. That other pernicky little dickens, cute as a bug's ear with her sassy red mouth and long eye-winkers; but this was one he could neighbor with.

The soft music gave way to a strident and jerky piece; all chewed up and sour, Ben thought, and she

changed it quickly. The little shop with the big reputation—just around the corner from everywhere—was offering a male quartet; Ben liked that best of all. “Weep no more, my lady—” He tried to blend with this, but his notes were too croaky. Then the daunting gas pains came back, and the girl knew it even though he didn’t make a fuss. She came to put a hand on his forehead.

“They’re just about the last straw that busted down the camel,” he admitted on a short breath.

“Yes; I know they’re hellish. But this will be the last. Tomorrow you’ll hardly remember them. That’s a wonderful thing about pain—we forget.”

“All right; I guess I’ll have to do the way they do back in Kansas.”

“How is that?” she dutifully inquired.

“They do the best they can.”

They both laughed at this, and she wiped the moisture from his face.

“Maybe we can play crib every night,” he said. “It’s one of my favorite pastimes.”

“Mine too,” she agreed. “Feeling better?”

“Big-boned stock, coming out of the winter strong,” he assured her. It was great to have her mother him up.

He had turned his head aside and at the top of the window he could see one bright star. He had been here so long—years, it seemed—he had forgotten there was any more outdoors. But of course the same old stars had been there all the time, with the old darkness back of them. He began to wonder about this darkness that must reach on forever. He had vaguely supposed

you went somewhere off there when your time came. Off to nothing—or was it something? He wondered what this buckskin girl believed.

"What do you guess happens when we wink out?" he demanded.

"You're still all right," she replied, evasively it seemed to him.

"You don't think the game is crooked?"

"I'm sure it isn't."

"Well, I don't know. If I had to go right now, I wouldn't be expecting the worst of it, but I don't throw in with a lot of people that have it all cut and dried. You take a notice in my paper there—resolutions of sympathy about the death of Aunt Selma Davis, put in by her lodge, one of those Daughters of something—kind of hen Masons they are. Starts off: 'It having pleased Almighty God to remove from our midst our dearly beloved sister' and so forth. You know, I don't hold with that. Aunt Selma was the nicest old thing, always sitting up with folks, sickness or babies or anything. That old dame never had a thought about herself, and nobody can tell me Almighty God could have got any fun out of removing her. At least, if He did, He was hard up for a good time. But what is Aunt Selma getting out of it? That's what puzzles me. Do you reckon she was snuffed out like an animal?"

Miss Doyle considered the question with brightened eyes. "Well, I'll tell you—" she hesitated, seeming to suspect the confidence she was about to make might be ill-advised. "This is just between us; it's only what I think, and I'd be ashamed to tell it to most people. Probably you'll call it silly." She paused again timidly.

"I bet it won't be silly if you studied it out," he encouraged.

"Don't ever tell anyone on me, but I've always been wicked in my beliefs. I think we're saved in the hereafter by the people still here that cared for us. If you go out with nobody caring for you—" Miss Doyle gestured oblivion. "But if somebody did care, even if just one person cared a lot, why, that keeps you alive."

"Where?"

She grinned at him. "You tell me," she said, "and isn't it time you slept?"

"Sure, it's time, but I don't feel to do it yet. Tell me some more stuff."

And presently, because her mind had been slipping off to that nursery upstairs, she was glowing with a description of it. Babies! What she wanted was to be in charge of the trainers up there. She pictured the bathing of a multitude of babies on a warmed metal table—sometimes forty of them.

"Great guns! The trail boss must have to get a corral count on 'em."

She explained about the adhesive tags on their wrists and backs.

"Sort of like branding and ear-marking," he agreed.

"Sometimes I steal up and take a look. I did last night," she confessed; "just in time to see a new one getting his bath of olive oil."

"And getting fed?" he wanted to know.

"Of course not; no food for eight hours. Karo water then, or an ounce of formula if the mother isn't ready."

"Sometimes do they yell all at once?"

"Certainly they do."

"Well, every fall I listen to a big bunch of white-faced calves that's being weaned. I bet it isn't any worse than that."

"It isn't bad at all," she told him. "You ought to listen in sometimes. And there's a children's ward only two doors away," she went on. "Boys on one side, girls on the other."

"How many head?"

"Oh, a dozen or two, usually."

"Well, now, think of all those little skeesicks getting sent to a hospital. I thought only old folks went there." He pondered a moment; then, with sudden animation: "I tell you; take a look-see and sneak one in here for a minute."

Doyle drew a quick breath. "It's against the rules."

"Aw, what do we care?"

They grinned guiltily at each other, and Doyle was at the door, a cautioning finger upraised. She tiptoed to the narrow hall between the wards. Poor Thelma slept as usual, her head at rest on the *Materia Medica*, her heavily framed spectacles escaping from a lax hand.

Three minutes later the entranced Doyle escorted to the bedside of Ben Carcross a small woman child in a pale blue bathrobe and white mules. The caller pushed the tumbled yellow hair from wide, sleepless blue eyes as an introduction was performed.

"Belinda, this is Mr. Carcross."

"Pardon my left hand," said Belinda, extending it and the sticky peppermint it still clasped. "You see, my right one has to be in a cask." The member she named was attached by a sling to her left shoulder.

"My great goodness!" exclaimed her host. "Did

some mean horse throw you? That's the way I broke mine once."

"It was my scooter threw me, and robbers came and stole it out of our basement that very night. My mother says so—a band of robbers with knives and guns and pistols."

"My, my! And I bet they never bring it back," said Mr. Carcross.

Doyle here lifted her guest to the bed, where conversation was easier. Belinda reeked of peppermint candy. "Now tell Mr. Carcross why I found you awake just now."

Belinda brought her eyes from little darting surveys of the strange room. "A lion!" she said.

"A lion? My stars!" Mr. Carcross was horrified. "Where was he?"

"He was under the bed and he poked his head out at me and he was all furry and had shiny eyes and growled and opened his mouth—like this." Belinda opened wide her mouth, darting her tongue swiftly in and out after the manner of indignant lions.

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Mr. Carcross. Belinda nodded vigorously.

"But you weren't afraid—a big girl like you?" suggested Miss Doyle.

"Well"—Belinda seemed anxious not to convey a false impression—"well, I thought I was afraid, but maybe I just imagined I was."

Mr. Carcross spoke up brightly, "Now, say, I'll bet it was that old hospital lion they have for sick folks to play with. He was in here all afternoon and I was throwing a ball for him to catch, and—"

"Where's the ball?" demanded Belinda.

"I was just going to tell you about that. He hit it too hard once with his paws and knocked it out that window over there, and—"

"It's shut—that window is."

"We keep it open afternoons. And then I gave him a good scolding and I guess he got scared of me and crawled under your bed."

Belinda eyed Mr. Carcross very, very closely. "What's the lion's name?"

Mr. Carcross hesitated a moment. "Now, let's see—what is the name of that old nuisance? Oh, yes—his name is Sidney."

"Well, he looked awful hungry and he growled at me. He growled right at me—like this." Belinda growled, producing shudders which she construed as demanding an encore.

"But that's because he's got a terrible cold, poor old thing; he's hoarse. And hungry. Why, all he can have to eat is tea and a little broth; I was going to give him some custard tomorrow—just a spoonful or two—but I won't do it if he goes around crawling under beds. Let him go hungry, let him starve."

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" pleaded Belinda. "Give him some cereal if he'll promise not to splash it."

But it seemed that Sidney was probably the worst cereal-splasher in the world. The last time Mr. Carcross had trusted him with cereal the whole front of him and the tablecloth was a sight. Also he gumbled his food, this being considered a terrible crime by all nice people. And, anyway, how old was Belinda?

"Guess," she urged. Mr. Carcross studiously felt her

arms and legs, looked at her teeth and prodded her stomach.

"Well, you're a long five or a short six."

"I'm five and a half since my arm was broke, and my doll has two front teeth."

Mr. Carcross was charmed to hear this and held up both hands to show his delight.

"And her name is Baby Dimples—it says so on the little sign on her sweater—and when her teeth drop out she's going to put them under a rug, and the next time she looks for them she'll find some money there."

"My sakes alive! I wish I could get money for mine that way."

"You try it once," Belinda encouraged him. She was here persuaded to sit in Doyle's lap in the big chair, denying vigorously, though with no accusation to justify it, that she was going to sleep.

"Of course not," agreed Doyle as the yellow head fell back on her shoulder. In the ensuing quiet Ben noticed that Doyle's face had changed a lot. Commonly it was rather stern, sometimes forbidding. Now it was gentled up, and her eyes—he had never decided if the eyes were grayish-green or bluish-green—were no longer hungry-looking. As she bent and brooded above the now sleeping child, they seemed to overflow with some celestial surplus. When she arose presently with her slumbering burden, Belinda's left hand, stiffly projecting, still enclosed the dissolving remnant of her peppermint.

"Next time try to cut out a boy from the bunch too." Thus a hoarse whisper from the bed.

CHAPTER SIX

BEN awoke regretfully from his final dream the next morning—a dream of being at table confronted by a spreading platter, a vast and glorious panorama of ham and eggs. Beyond this lovely lowland arose a noble mountain of hot cakes, golden to its cloud-piercing summit. Discovering the insubstantial character of the vision, he shut his eyes in a vain effort to recapture it. All the morning he was haunted by this dream festival. He suffered visual hallucinations. This proved, in his opinion, that he was a lot better and should be allowed regular food, but all the flouncing Miss Ellis would permit him was the custard promised the day before. The merest dab and, at that, not a custard to send up any cheers about.

He had words with Miss Ellis about this, or tried to. He did his part. But the girl, he was quick to note, had lost a lot of her pep; wouldn't send in snappy comebacks the way she did at first. She was not only respectful, she was meek and persuasive. Ham and eggs would be fatal at this juncture. He didn't want to die, did he?

"That's my business," he growled at her. He could think of a lot worse ways of dying. She promised one egg with toast for tomorrow, and merely looked hurt when he growled again.

She was still the gentle and considerate nurse when Mr. Melcher, self-confessed vice-president, brisked

wonderfully in with more mail that afternoon. She shot this gentleman the lancing look as he revealed his lacquered hair by removing the perfect hat. It was probable that today he would notice how efficiently his grouchy friend was being cared for by an unusual type of nurse.

He did not. After greeting the patient he looked only at the priceless daffodils and the radio, exclaimed, "Capital, by Jove!" and began to chatter to his friend in a vivacious but refined manner about a certain oil merger. He became spirited in this, yet he invariably said, "By gad!" or "Dash it all!" where common persons would have used coarser speech. Stony-faced Mr. Carcross put his spectacles in place and opened a fresh copy of his hick newspaper. Yet no sooner had the rare Mr. Melcher bowed himself out—he hadn't even put down the stick, hat or gloves this time, or sought a moment of confidential chat with the starry-eyed nurse—than the old grouch was grinning and chuckling over his paper; probably reading about someone who had some more measles.

Miss Ellis was out of patience with the old cross-patch. Still, she had learned something. He was an oil man. A big oil man, it seemed, and therefore probably an Indian. From her occasional reading of the daily press, Miss Ellis had formed a belief that big oil men of the present day were likely to be Indians from Oklahoma. This one had high cheek-bones and grunted like an Indian—a half-breed, anyway. By the time Doyle came to relieve her she had concluded that she must have mistaken her vocation.

"I'd ought to have kept up my dancing," she told Doyle. "I might have been with Ziegfeld by now."

Doyle grinned cheerfully. "Darling, I know just two things about our lovely sex. Every woman that isn't actually a cripple thinks she would have made a wonderful dancer, and after they get to be thirty they're all afraid their hair is coming out."

"And he's an Indian." Miss Ellis gestured to the outer room.

"Yes?"

"Yeah, one of those big oil Indians from Oklahoma. Probably snared into marriage by some white woman. I read such a case the other day."

"No use trying to keep anything from you, is there?" returned Doyle fulsomely. Miss Ellis departed, sniffing.

When night drew in and Doyle's active duties of the hour were discharged, Ben regaled her with morsels from the new Advertiser. Beef cattle were up a cent; Yengling Brothers had just finished a swell job of painting on Bud Simpson's new hot-dog stand south of town on the highway—red and white stripes and blue stars and across the front, Buddy's Better Barbecue—Just a Good Place to Eat. There were other items of a personal nature that seemed to renew the reader's nostalgia.

"I'll fool you all some time," he warned; "now that I got my pants and a getaway stake."

He read that the Broken Dollar store had just stocked a new line of imported novelties and that Neil Brothers, the popular and up-to-date morticians, were conducting funerals with economy and refinement—"Give them a call." He broke off in the middle of an item about Geerwood, that jeweler, to explain about the wrist watch he wore.

He'd had a good watch, carried it thirty years; a nice quartz chain with a solid-gold steer for a charm. But she had coaxed him into getting this wrist watch. "She" said it had more class. But it hadn't stood up in the cow business. After you had headed a few that were trying to leave the bunch and come up so sudden you could have stopped on a dime, this flimsy little thing had quit. He'd taken it to Geerwood and told him it would probably have to be pared down under the hoof or something to keep it from stumbling; and Geerwood had put a pepper-box in one eye and looked a long time and fiddled with tweezers and said it was probably an all-right watch for a lady or even a man that sat at a desk. He wore the old watch now when he was riding the range.

He went on to read that Mrs. Amanda Barnes had given birth to bouncing twin boys, all three doing fine, said P. J. Snell, M.D., office in the Empire Block over City Pharmacy.

"Twin boys!" Doyle interrupted the reading. She seemed quite sane on every subject but babies. She arose with gleaming eyes and went quickly out, returning a few moments later with Belinda and a boy, whom she proudly exhibited.

"Well, well, got one of each kind!"

"I caught them before they went to sleep."

The boy was chunky, a rather solid lump, slow of speech, in a voice prematurely bass. He now bluntly rejected the dogma that fairies took teeth from under a rug and left money in their place. "It's only your parents do it," he declared. Mr. Carcross then took him upon the bed and inquired if he had ever ridden a horse.

"Ho! I should think I have. I've rode every single pony in Central Park."

Mr. Carcross was impressed. "Some bad actors in that bunch, I'll bet."

The boy wasn't quite sure about this, but if he had a gun he could shoot deer over there any day. The old nurse had taken his pistol away from him when he happened to hit another boy's head with it. It was a good pistol and made a noise like anything.

Belinda's eyes glistened. "She smacked him good too."

"If I ever catch that old nurse in the park!" said the boy. He left dirty work to be inferred.

"Ho! There's a policeman in the park," Belinda taunted.

"What'd I care for an old policeman?" demanded the boy.

"Sure! You'd tell him where to head in," confirmed the host, and told of a pony of his own that liked to have boys and girls ride him; a spotted pony that was named Diamond Jack and would come right up to anyone who held out a hand to him.

"Could you keep him up here for me?" demanded the boy.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. He'd have to be pretty sharp shod for these floors."

"I don't care so much about ponies," said Belinda firmly, "I think tigers are better."

"That ain't any way to talk," rebuked the boy.

"It is, too, isn't it, Mr. Carcross? My tiger that you wind up his stomach with a key can growl and jump at you three times."

"I bet you never had a tiger at all," ventured the boy.

"There's a tiger cat at my house," their host tactfully intervened, "and when it catches a rat it wants to show off to everyone, so it comes and jumps on a window-still and tries to meow with the rat still in its mouth; and it can't meow without dropping the rat, and it has an awful time." The diversion was but momentary. The boy and girl were striving not too amiably for the exclusive attention of their audience when Doyle removed them.

"Thank you so much for a lovely evening," said Belinda at parting, but the boy only mumbled hoarsely about a pony as he shook the hand of his host.

When Doyle came back her patient was staring at the one star that showed at the top of the window. "I never had a boy," he told her.

"No?"

"I never even had a girl."

"Not even a girl? Why, you said—I'm sure you did—when you were speaking of your family coming home—'Mother and the girls.' I'm sure you said something like that."

"Uh-huh. Likely. Most men call their wives mother, when they get about so old. Guess I do sometimes. I never noticed."

"But then, who are the girls?"

"Oh, them? Her sisters. Vannie and Gail. They're all right. Used to teach school before the money come. Good company for her. Glad she's got 'em to be with her. Huh, mother and the girls. No, I never had any family. Only a tree."

Her look was a little startled, but she said mildly, "Was it a nice tree?"

"I'll tell you about my tree." He grinned up at her rather shamefaced. "But don't ever let on to anyone. They'd laugh."

She smiled, and her eyes promised secrecy before she dimmed the lights. The star showed plainer now, and he kept gazing at it as he talked.

And it wasn't really his tree; he had adopted it, kind of, when it was a baby. "The ranch-house yard didn't have a sign of a tree; only a little fringe of bushes along the ditch. I was twelve or so. I found this tree about a mile off up a side draw; a sassy, pert little cuss about two feet high—a fir, I found out. I lugged a spade over and took it up, careful not to cut any of its baby roots, and I brought some of its own dirt along in a flour sack and planted it in a corner of the yard where I could look out from my bed and see it on moonlight nights. I planted it good and I mulched it with leaf mold and watered it from the ditch every time it come sundown. And right away it got to be a fat little rascal putting out new feelers. Everyone joshed me because I made kind of a pet of it.

"I planted it in the spring and it was all right that summer; then we had a hard winter and come spring again, it looked puny and ailing, some of the branches showing burned. So I set to nursing it again; cultivated the roots and got it to going fresh. It gained about two feet that summer. I used to sneak out at night and whisper to it and jolly it along. I'd tell it if it kept up that lick it would grow to be one of the finest trees in the whole world. I thought then

it could understand me—ain't so sure now it didn't. Anyway, it grew and grew, and I was prouder of it than I ever dared tell anyone. It's a great tall tree now, but it still gives me kind of a warm father's feeling, if you can understand that. Of course, everyone else that sees it thinks it's just a tree. How would they know?"

"Of course, they wouldn't know," agreed Doyle, and said no more. This copper-top was certainly one you could talk to. You could unbelt to her, and she'd understand.

Ben looked out at the star. It was nearly to the bottom of the window now, but three other smaller stars were showing at the top—always more stars! His thoughts turned from a bannered past to a future that didn't seem to flaunt banners.

"She wanted a big house with gold chairs in it and a tea-wagon."

It sounded irrelevant, and Doyle laid a cool hand over his eyes.

He was still for a moment, then chuckled richly. "I bet General Pettigrew ain't having to iron his own silk hat any longer. He used to upset the whole danged outfit doing that, back at the ranch, whenever he was going on parade some place." On this cryptic but cheerful pronouncement he lapsed gently into sleep.

"You and your little-boy tree," whispered Doyle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THIS Dr. Madden was not a person who seemed likely to whet Ben's relish for life. He was a hindersome body, nothing but a trouble sign, as Ben had suspected from the first. Just when the patient was getting good after two weeks of quiet, Madden got nasty.

"I don't like the way you're reacting," he announced. Ben thought he was reacting fine and said so, but the doctor sent in a young busybody in a white suit and gold spectacles who asked all sorts of personal questions and put the answers in a little book—that is, many of the answers.

Then the patient must have a blood count; another one, it seemed. That, of course, was plain funny—counting a person's blood! What wouldn't they think up next?

The next thing—Madden thought it up after he had read the note-book—was to poke a kind of puffy little spot under his left eye. It wasn't anything and hadn't hurt until poked. That made a sharp pain in his cheek and Madden said, as if he had a good joke on Ben, "I thought so!"

Then, being still bedfast, what did they do but hoist him to an indoor wagon with rubber tires and truck him off to another room downstairs where they went through all that old nonsense with the X-ray dingus.

The resulting portraits of his jaws were again

nothing to look at if you asked Ben. But Madden in an irritating way tapped some pale spots with a pencil point and chirped, "Just what I thought," for all the world like the other slicker in San Francisco. Only this time they had him hog-tied.

In another room, a stern-faced, relentless-looking girl clamped something on him so he couldn't breathe right, and pretty soon he was riding Dandy Allen along the lower end of the south field taking a look-see to make sure the spring ditch cleaning was going right. He returned shortly minus two back teeth—pretty good lookers, if he did say so himself; but Madden and another outlaw, holding a shiny tool, wouldn't let him touch them. Madden said he might clear up now—that is, after he'd had his eyes tested.

Wasn't that a hell of a note! You went to an eye man and he sent you to a dentist; then you went to a dentist and he sent you to an eye man. They nicked you going and coming. He muttered something of this grievance.

"How long since you had your eyes examined?" Madden wished to know.

"Just this last year," Ben stoutly told him. Madden was frowning in a puzzled way at Ben's glasses. "Are these what he gave you a prescription for?" he sharply asked. You would have thought he was a lawyer and Ben was up for sheep-stealing.

"Well, not precisely the same. I kind of lost his prescription; these are just as good. I only need glasses to do a little reading with. My eyes are great. I'll spot you fifty yards right now and read a brand farther than you will, for fun, money or marbles."

"But where did you get these?" Madden wasn't to be turned aside.

"Well, I picked them out."

"Just what I thought!" These wise boys! Always just been thinking something after you told them! "Well, I'll pick them out myself now"—and Madden put Ben's glasses into his pocket. He had his nerve.

Then they sent him a man who measured his eyes again and made him a pair of glasses to order, like a tailor. They weren't bad, he was bound to admit. In fact, they were right good glasses and didn't make his eyes burn after a spell of reading, as the others sometimes did. Anyway, it was over now. They had herded him into a dehorning chute, yanked a couple of as good teeth as God ever gave to man, if he was any judge; and he was wearing their glasses and he hoped they were satisfied. He had said as much to Doyle, adding: "This Madden is certainly one man like I ain't ever seen before. I hope I don't have to pester with him much longer. Having him around is like being in a bunch of bull nettles."

"Maybe you wouldn't have had to come here at all if you'd had those infected teeth out before," Doyle told him.

Of course it might be so if Doyle said so, but things certainly went on in this place that Pete Snell would never believe.

They were giving him a little human food at last. Into a bowl of fair-looking soup he crumbled crackers to fine bits, glaring defiantly up at Doyle as she rearranged the dishes on his tray. Then he remembered it wasn't Doyle who had told him he shouldn't do that.

It was at this meal, eaten in his very own way, that a new idea came to him. Addie and the bunch were in Paris now, liable to return any time. If they got back on him too soon—her dear old father, General Rufus Pettigrew, his sisters, Gail and Vannie, and her brother Presh, who was really Rufus Pettigrew, Junior, called Presh into his manhood because he had been Precious as an infant—he might even find this hospital a valued refuge. Here, they couldn't badger him. Like making him eat artichokes, for one thing. He regarded these as a vegetable pest and believed that the best anyone could do was to spoon up mayonnaise dressing with their leaves. If that was all they wanted, why not use a real spoon? He would lead his own life, even if he had to become a regular boarder here—eat what he wanted, wear the good old watch with the quartz chain and the solid gold longhorn, and his big soft hat. God had meant him to be a cowman. He was an oil man by accident.

And he wouldn't have a secretary. Addie wrote of acquiring a wonderful secretary and companion, a lady by the name of Madame St. John Smythe, an American from Chicago, but who had lived in Europe so long that she pronounced her native state Illinwah in the cutest way. She was doing wonderful things for all of them; they would soon be able to think in French—Ben paused on this for a certain cynical reflection—and he must have a secretary of his own; someone like that wonderful Mr. Melcher, who dressed so beautifully and was yet so calm about it all. Someone like Melcher for him to copy? Not while there were any good hospitals left!

He pondered rebellion and smoked the first cigar of his convalescence. He'd tell a few Pettigrews where to head in at. He opened a new Advertiser and caught an item that sickeningly fogged his dream of independence: "Work on the swell new Carcross mansion is progressing and same will be an ornament to our city. The family is still visiting different portions of Europe, except Ben, who writes Doc Snell that he had an operation in New York."

All right for the swell mansion with little gold chairs and a shiny tea-wagon and whatnots and so forth. Let them have their fun! He'd still have the good old ranch house. They couldn't lay a finger on that. He brooded savagely above the cigar, and Doyle told him, "Your eyes look funny—like two lumps of ice."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEY got big-hearted and let Ben up. He had to be tender of himself. His feet were like clubs and he was dizzy for a moment while Miss Ellis tidily arrayed him in the gay robe that Melcher had sent. But, after he had lowered himself into the wheel chair and was blanketed, he felt ripe for adventure. Miss Ellis trundled him down the corridor, then through an alley, and his forgotten out-of-doors burst on him with breath-taking splendor. An arch of blue sky, yellow sunlight, patches of green and a far vista of roofs. He had felt pretty silly, being trucked along by a girl, but he forgot it in this heart-swelling release.

His chair came to rest in a sort of high roof-garden bordered by little shrubs and flowering plants in boxes; a spacious garden with other chairs in rows or here and there in groups—chairs occupied by swathed figures, topped with faces of indoor pallor. In the shade of an awning he looked at his watch, then at the sun. He was facing his own West, and far over the roofs he could see a rugged palisade. He knew there was a river in between. It was like finishing ninety days in jail; pretty exciting.

He could remember once when he felt all bubbling in just this way: A boy going to town for a Fourth of July—exploding firecrackers and floating dust, the maddening fragrance of roasting peanuts, shouting, laughter, neighing horses, the blare of music from a

merry-go-round—a noisy, golden blur of wonder and beauty. He had sweatily trudged with water to feed the engine of the merry-go-round and received free rides for the service. The rides had made him sick, but he hadn't quit. More water, another ride, sick again! He wondered now why he had kept it up—some blood madness in his young veins.

He looked down and forgot the long-gone carnival day as he saw a man run a mower over a strip of lawn a few blocks away. All the cattleman in him was revolted. A patch of good feed, and look what they did to it! Little these city people cared that a couple of head of stock could do right well there. He was brought from the economic outrage by a cheerful voice at his side:

"Hello, sheriff!"

He turned to find another chair wheeled up beside his own, the voice issuing from a head more than half hidden by bandages. One pale eye under a slanting strand of lank, pale hair shrewdly surveyed him from the visible part of a white face spangled by rusty freckles.

"Hello, Whitey! How you coming, boy?"

"Shooting a million!"

"That's fine."

His neighbor fumbled for a cigarette and a match. He was using but one hand. After the first inhalation he demanded, "What's your story, old-timer—been in a cutting scrape?"

"Yeah. What's yours?"

"Bunged up. Plane crash."

"Stacked you, did she?"

"She did, through half a mile of nothing. 'Too damn high down,' like the Chinaman said."

"My good gosh!"

"I had a cabinetmaker tinkering at me; busted tubing and so forth; nails all over the place. You ought to see the photographs he took. If they don't show a keg of nails in me I'm anything you want to call me. The camera boys got a good shot at me coming down, though. Trust those birds!"

"What do you mean—a good shot?"

"Movie stunt. One piece of good luck for that gripping drama of the clouds."

"Well, now! I'll bet you learned your lesson."

"Don't let anyone tell you different. I'm wondering right now about some good safe job I could eat on without leaving the ground."

"The ground can fool you too. Only time I was ever laid up before, a horse went loco and lay over on me without saying a word. Right across my knee, balanced there, rocking back and forth."

"No way to spend an afternoon."

"I got one hand under his side and waited till the crazy old fool heaved down the slope, then I heaved with him and off he went. Turned over four times before he fetched up at the bottom of a gully. I never was so glad to have anything leave me in my life."

"I'll bet!"

"He landed thirty feet off. Yes, sir, I still hold the state record for hurling a thousand-pound horse."

"That puts horses out for me." A chair wheeling toward them caught the speaker's one quick eye. "Listen," he whispered, "get this lad—a real honest-

to-goodness professor at some college, teaches this philosophy. Anyway, that's his story. I'll make him do his stuff for you. If I could be as funny, and know it, as this lad can be, and not know it, they'd book me solid fifty-two weeks."

The chair, wheeled by an orderly, halted before them. Only the head of its bundled occupant was revealed.

"How are you today, professor? I want you to meet my friend the sheriff."

The newcomer nodded doubtfully to Ben, with a quick glance of distrust at the other. He was a tired-faced man looking older than he really was, Ben thought. Even the lusterless dark hair showing below a gray stocking-cap looked tired.

"My young friend here is incurably facetious," he warned Ben. "I shall believe you to be an officer of the law when I have your own word for it."

"Why, the sheriff just threw the thousand-pound horse thirty-four and a half feet, measured distance."

"I only made a rough guess," corrected the athlete modestly.

The professor's smallish mouth widened perceptibly; it might have been the beginning of a wan and puzzled smile or a mere wincing as from pain.

"There, now, you heard the sheriff himself say so. But listen; I been thinking up some more new jobs for me."

The professor cocked a non-committal eye at the speaker.

"Well, how's this for a summer snap? You know how road signs are always shot full of holes? A man

has to go along as soon as they're put up and shoot 'em with a shotgun. It's light work and keeps you outdoors."

The professor brightened. "But that is always the work of vandals—strolling hunters with a vein of mischief."

"That's what you think, but I'm telling you. A friend of mine had a New England beat last summer and made good money, but he got shooter's cramp in his trigger finger—"

"But what possible purpose is served—"

"That's a secret, one of the things I ain't allowed to tell. Then, for winter," he went quickly on, "I can be a kitchen detective."

"Yes?" The professor was still wary.

"You know these tin boxes that it says Cake or Bread in gold letters on the outside? Well, I flash my badge and get into the kitchen, and you'd be surprised; in about eighty per cent of cases the dame will have bread in a box that says Cake in plain letters, or she'll have cake in a bread box, or is keeping sugar in a tin that says Coffee. Sometimes you'll find a woman that's got everything wrong at once, and nine cases out of ten like that, you go up to the bathroom and find the mat that says Bath on it upside down or even wrong side up, so a person couldn't read it. Of course it ain't such a pleasant job. These crooks break down and plead with you or try bribery, and of course if an officer ain't on the level— Anyway it's a good winter job. You see new faces every day. Better than sitting in those apartment-house basements and pounding the main pipe with a sledge hammer so it'll be heard in every room."

The professor's gaze, riveted on the speaker, had revealed a certain fascination, but he quickly recovered. "I'm aware," he began, with careful sarcasm, "that our sumptuary legislation has gone to perhaps ill-advised lengths, but I need not to be told that you are exaggerating in probably all of these instances." He laughed rather painfully, but kept shrewd eyes on the suspected one.

"Well, be that as it may, how about a job in a bank for me? I only want to find out one thing about that. You know these fatty blonde girls that work in candy stores? When they first take a job they stuff themselves with candy—probably eat two or three bucks' worth the first day. But the boss never kicks. He knows they'll eat themselves sick, and after that they're off it."

"Yes," assented the professor neutrally.

"Well, about this bank job: I want to find out do banks work the same system with their clerks and the cash—let 'em pinch off a few twenties or tens till they get tired of the stuff? What do you know about it?"

The professor, who had observed the speaker with a strained and at times harried look, was quick with his reply:

"What I know about it is that a course in reflective thinking would do you a world of good, my lad. Your besetting vice seems to be casual, undirected thought. You skim surfaces and mask your cowardice under a patina of barren jocularly. You maintain, I grant, a certain emotional congruity, but still only of surfaces."

The victim of this dissection smirked dismay with such of his face as could be seen.

The professor went relentlessly on: "You skim lightly off on a profitless exposition of absurdities. A pity you couldn't have been drilled in the persistent consideration of premises. I dare say you have had occasional problems quite as perplexing as those daily besetting the lives of serious workers."

"Well, that puts me in the hole," Whitey allowed, sagging farther in his chair.

"I could outline a course of reading," the professor kindly added, "though I doubt if you would pursue it with any profit. Fermentation, you know, doesn't take place in sterile fluids."

"Wow! That's a slam," the victim remarked. "I can tell by the naughty look in your eyes."

"Seriously, if I have your type, I can't see you effective in the elaboration of hypotheses or tentatively accepted suggestions, or in a further study I might prescribe in deductive development and the relation of implication in mathematics. I positively cannot."

"Me, neither," the subject cordially agreed, with a furtive wink at Ben.

"Yet you are a type rich in suggestion, not without value in a laboratory."

"That's something, anyway." Whitey turned to Ben in triumph. "What did I tell you, sheriff?"

Mr. Carcross coughed and glanced away, embarrassed.

"But listen, professor, on the level now, and from one brother Elk to another, do you ever get down to the real McCarthy in your trade where you have to act quick without looking it up in a book?"

"Again and again," replied the professor heatedly.

"Emergencies such as I imagine you to have in mind constantly arise in the classroom."

"The classroom!" hooted Whitey. "As how? What do you do when you act quick there?"

"Search for an explanation that will meet all the facts with the least expenditure of assumption. The action is customarily simple—life is simple. One of our masters has said, as you may or perhaps may not recall, 'Nature is pleased with simplicity and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes.' I beg you not to imagine that my own problems require a less practical solution than those of the man in the street. Quite often enough I find myself awkwardly situated. I am called upon to make the tremendous advance from collected data to hypotheses—what is sometimes referred to as the inductive leap." He beckoned an orderly. "I fear, gentlemen, that I would be wise to retire to my room. This conversation has seemed to excite me unduly. However, I shall hope to meet you both another day." He waved farewell with a long pale hand as the orderly wheeled him away.

"You got the poor cuss into a temperature," accused Ben.

"Just the same I got his number. That squirrel's afraid to think anything whatsoever that he can't find some rule in a book to prove it. He don't have any good time a-tall."

"He thinks he knows all about problems," grumbled Ben. "I bet I could put him up a few that would have him walking the floor."

The sun now hung low above that far palisade. A paint-sky sunset pretty soon, Ben thought. Man talk

sure had tasted good. He was sorry when Miss Ellis came for him. His new acquaintance swept her trim figure with his one competent eye.

"You got a pip of a nurse," he declared, in tones he took no pains to muffle.

Miss Ellis welcomed, though not effusively, a tribute she was so richly qualified to exact. "One of these fast workers, buddy?"

"Sister, I'm a speed demon."

"I simply never mix with the customers," retorted Miss Ellis though still with that genius for benevolence which so became her.

"Well, so long, sheriff!"

"So long, Whitey! Maybe we'll cut trails again and powwow some more tomorrow!"

Back in his bed he read fresh letters. Addie had bought a new wedding ring to replace one old and worn—a simple platinum band studded with small diamonds. Mrs. St. John Smythe had pronounced the old one outmoded. He wondered if Addie had thrown the old ring away. It had done for her twenty-five years. She ought to give it a good home for the rest of its days. The same social authority was showing Addie how to "slenderize." He wasn't sure what this meant. He looked glum after the letter and remained so until he found a vivacious item in the fresh Advertiser: "Mrs. August Engstrom, aged eighty-six, living with her married granddaughter, Mrs. Mels Holtman, over Beaver Head way, smoked in bed for the last time Tuesday night."

His thoughts floated back to the wondrous hour outside. He dismissed the unpleasant incident of the van-

dal with a lawn-mower and thought about having Whitey around quite a lot. Concerning the professor he wondered what you could do with one like him on a cow ranch. It was certain he wouldn't be any top hand. But someone was needed to play off against this Madame St. John So-and-So. Smythe—that was it. Smith spelled as fancy as you could and still keep the sound. And calling herself madame when she came from Chicago, even if she had forgotten how to pronounce Illinois. Mrs. John Smith—that's what she was, practically. He guessed you were meant to be sort of keeled over by the "Madame St. John" part so you would forget the following "Smith."

Then his mind returned to another of Addie's disturbing suggestions—sports clothes. This last letter said he would of course be needing a full outfit of these; they were so useful for week-ends. He asked Doyle for the meaning of these terms, and Doyle enlightened him—golf clothes and white pants and such.

And week-ends—he remembered those now. He'd had a couple at Bill Hepburn's new house. They were nothing much. At a week-end you got drunk on Saturday and had a hangover on Sunday. You could do that any days in the week if so minded.

CHAPTER NINE

BEN looked forward to his afternoon outings. Of course, the view, all cluttered with roofs and full of straight lines slicing up things, wasn't much to a man used to big plains and rolling hills softened by distance. But the outdoors was good to smell; at least, no taint of antiseptics.

It was especially good when a rain brought the smell of growing things up to the roof; although Ben was always troubled by rain that fell into other water. Jealously he watched it fall; an ocean close by, not needing the precious stuff, yet indifferently drinking it; good inches of it that, in a better-managed scheme of things—what the professor called “a superior millennial pattern”—would have fallen on parched fields and made feed for hungry herds. Rain wasting itself, when he could think of country so dry that two head to a township would overstock it. He often wondered how feed was holding up around New York until he remembered that here they called ranches “farms” and measured land by the square foot.

And there were his pleasant new friends. The professor never seemed quite at ease with Whitey, always scanning his face to make sure if he meant what he said; yet he sought him out each day as if in the thrall of some sinister spell, as the tongue persistently seeks out a doubtful tooth.

“That professor, with you,” Ben told Whitey, “is

like an antelope that sees a red bandanna a hunter puts up on a stick. Something tells him he better not go near it, but he just can't help edging closer."

That was the day Whitey returned an improving book the professor had recommended—a book professing to expose the mysteries of space by means of a non-Euclidean geometry. Whitey disparaged the volume to Ben.

"Batty diagrams, mostly. The guy that wrote it had just one flash you can take hold of. He says space is limited and all around space is chaos. Now I ask you! Is that anything to cost two-fifty, which is what this book is marked? But it's the only thing you can get your teeth into and answer yes or no. And when I ask the professor what the hell this chaos is that surrounds space and what's outside of this chaos, he'll be right there with a mess of words."

The professor was. After a masterly smile at Whitey's question—calling it "quaintly naive"—he quoted an authority named Einstein. Ben knew the Einstein who kept the Broken Dollar Store at Branlock, but it seemed that another was in question; one of whom the professor spoke almost with awe. This superior Einstein had discovered enough truths about space to enlighten Whitey, had not his reflective processes become atrophied, rendering him incapable of any schematic fashioning of conclusions from authentic data.

"What did I tell you?" demanded Whitey of Ben, who was himself astounded when the truth came: This other Einstein had discovered that space is not only limited but curved!

"Space curved, hey? So that's the royal raspberries?" demanded Whitey. He turned again to Ben, his one eye flashing scorn. "That's a nice thing to tell an airman who's proved different. You can bet this Einstein ain't ever been off the ground. Say I'd like to give him a little trip on high. I'd show him some things about space."

The professor chuckled at this fresh naïveté and proceeded at once to a full and frank interpretation of his authority. Whitey at last gleaned that time was held to be involved in the muddle. He forthwith, in plain words, told the professor all about time:

"Yeah, time! Well listen, brother, time ain't anything, and all the Einsteins in New York can't tell me different. You could put all time in your eye and not know it was there. Where would your time be if nothing moved? Answer me that."

The professor lightly began to answer him that; then, as Ben privately considered, he seemed to bog down; strike a muskeg or something.

"I don't think—" He broke off. "I don't think I quite get your novel assumption."

Whitey patiently elaborated: "Suppose nothing moved; suppose the sun and the moon and us and all these atoms stopped short. Where would time be? That's what you and this Isidore Einstein overlooked."

The professor stared, shocked to silence by this blasphemy.

"I mean, suppose everything was nothing—just empty space. There wouldn't even be one second of time until someone hove a brick into it."

"A mere quibble. Quite too absurd!" murmured the professor.

"All right, go on and show me. Time ain't a thing but the way you measure how fast something else moves. I'm willing to give your boy friend a break, but I can't string with him about space being curly until after he's gone up and had a good look at it. I don't mean hedge-hopping—I mean up."

The professor smiled in a pained manner and returned to the battle with testimony that left Whitey thinking less and less of this Einstein. It was alleged that going up a few miles in space proved nothing; that with an ideal plane Whitey could fly a straight course and eventually, because of the curvature of space, find himself at his starting point.

This was plain apple-sauce. Whitey sneered. It was an eloquent sneer, despite the circumstance that bandages concealed the most of it. "And us paying good money to these air-mail flyers for getting us nowhere. They leave L. A. and fly like hell and there they are back again. Like climbing on one of these wooden horses. You can go round and round, and you get off, and where you been?"

"Pre-cisely, in a way—in a way." The professor was jauntily confident.

Whitey looked to Ben for understanding, his free hand tapping his head. "This Einstein friend of yours sounds like one of these typical New Yorkers that don't know a thing west of Hoboken or north of the Bronx. What business is he in?"

The professor replied with dignity that his authority was not in business, and vainly strove to convey some understanding of his eminence.

Ben, finding the talk barren, lost himself in a cluster of darkish clouds that promised rain. He pictured them

above thirsty stretches of Lone Tree, wished they might hover there until too heavy with rain. Vaguely he gathered that the professor was putting a bee on Whitey, but that boy never knew when he was licked. And then he began idly wondering about time. According to Whitey, it was nothing, but that was strong language. Ben's thoughts wandered back over all the years—fat years and lean. Whitey might be right, but still time fooled you a lot. There was past time with dry years when he had to work his face at the bank. And now there would be future time with a big house and little gold chairs. He became aware that the professor was saying to Whitey, "Of course, I grant you a certain fumbling sagacity."

Miss Ellis arrived at this moment, and there was a spirited exchange between herself and Whitey, who meaningly challenged: "I bet you're a hot number on the floor when the saxes get going."

"I never make blind dates," returned Miss Ellis pointedly.

"Meaning this disguise?" Whitey smoothed the bandages. "Well, I don't blame you; a girl can't be too careful after she's been chose Miss Atlantic City a couple of times like you must have been. Still you'd be surprised how much I looked like John Gilbert before my last crash. Of course I ain't had a peek at myself lately."

"Were you at the war?" Miss Ellis asked with mild interest.

"Me and some others. Sister, I hate to say it—this is just between us—but that war would have lasted longer without me."

"Trust me to keep your secret," the nurse told him, and wheeled Ben away.

There was no mail that day, so, back in his room, Ben read over Addie's last letter, considering items hitherto neglected. When Doyle came he told her Addie had written: "Of course, we are all terribly provincial." He wasn't sure what that meant, though probably it wasn't true, anyhow. She said how jolly it was that the girls wouldn't have to take up their educational work again. "She means the schoolteaching," he explained. Addie herself had taught school before they were married. And Mrs. St. John Smythe had told Addie that she was the perfect tawny type.

Doyle, with long needles, sat by the floor lamp and knitted gray woolen yarn into a rug, making short replies to Ben's comments as they invited.

After a while Belinda came in bringing her doll. On Ben's bed she told him a lively story about a cowardly duck that lived in the bathtub and was afraid of cold water. It simply refused to have a cold shower turned on it after the hot bath, and then Belinda showed it every day how brave a girl could be—not squeal or anything when the cold needles pricked her. She went to sit in the rocker and sang a lullaby to her doll. This boasted a rhythm at the beginning, but after "Rock-a-by-baby" it went into a high, strained recitative, with repetitions and improvisations on the duck theme. These lost tone and at last flickered out. Belinda had put herself to sleep with her lullaby, the doll still wide-eyed. Doyle lifted them both while Ben noted the look that always surprisingly softened her face at these moments.

When she came back from restoring Belinda, "You'll soon be out," she told him.

"They can't put me out until I get good and ready, can they?" Ben asked in sudden alarm.

"Of course not. Are you getting to like it here?"

"Better than I like some things," he mysteriously told her.

"You're getting strong now. Pretty soon I'll prowl you upstairs and show you all those wonderful babies. There is the grandest one up there. It's four months old and weighs fourteen pounds, and has the loveliest—"

Doyle was off again. You couldn't keep her away from babies—like sticky fly-paper to her. He began to wonder what Doyle had to do with time and what relation she was to the star he could see through the window. Life, of course, would be long-trail for her; long-trail for her and all those babies she prattled about. Long-trail for everyone. Time couldn't be as simple as Whitey said. Time ate you up and was always hungry. It ate everyone up, though some it let get fat first. He thought of his lone tree—long-trail for that too. But time was a hungry, sneaking animal, playful often, but only just to fool you. He fell asleep wishing Doyle might have a dozen or so babies. But time was fooling her.

CHAPTER TEN

BEN CARCROSS was under his own power. Madden, after being nagged, had consented to a formal resurrection—his clothes on. Pants—those pants whose lack had left him so wretchedly defenseless—enfolded his sadly diminished, but now daily strengthening legs. It was only fair of Madden, after Ben had satisfied so many of his old woman's whims—having a lot of good teeth out and wearing glasses that you got on a prescription the same as medicine.

He dressed with the capable Miss Ellis to valet him. Miss Ellis approved his dark suit with the pin stripe, and selected a shirt and the gray cravat and handkerchief to match. He surveyed himself in the glass. Gaunted! Nothing left but the running gear; hollows under the high cheek-bones, the outstanding thin nose with its bony ridge more than ever prominent, the dark eyes set farther in under heavy brows still black. Miss Ellis felt rather a pride in him now. His tall form was only a little rounded at the shoulders. But he refused to let her comb the shock of gray hair her own way, as she had done when he was helpless—with some sticky mess to keep it down. He parted the hair on the left and was careless about it. He still felt funny on his feet; be a push-over in a scrap. But he was up. He glanced over a New York paper, hastily because there was no Branlock news in it. Ben had to laugh at that. From all a body could tell by that famous paper, Branlock didn't even exist.

In the afternoon he proudly wheeled Whitey from his ward to the open place and Whitey was pleased by the attention, telling Ben he was a peach of a pilot. Ben had meant to go back for the professor, but his chair was already out and the professor was reading a large book that looked hard.

Ben settled in a wicker armchair with the aloof look of a hospital visitor, while Whitey told the professor a new thing he had learned about time. Probably the professor didn't know it, but when you went on a boat to China or some place like that, you went to bed Monday and got up Wednesday, and coming back you found two Mondays in succession, right out there in the middle of the ocean.

The professor waved a long hand of dismissal at this chronological freak. "A description of the unknown in terms of the known," he murmured; and again: "Nothing is the cause of a phenomenon in the absence of which it nevertheless occurs."

Whitey smirked at Ben, and Ben told Whitey a few shameful things about the cattle business. In '19 he sold fall calves for forty dollars; in '20 the same animals sold for twelve dollars. Again, in '19 he had been offered seventy-five dollars a head for a thousand picked cows. He turned it down, and one year later took thirty-five. It was happenings like that made a cow man wish time wasn't really anything—that it would shut up like an accordion.

The professor, looking up dreamy-eyed from his book, listened to these scandals. He had traveled in the West once and seen acres and acres of cattle preserves.

"'Preserves!'" echoed Ben.

"Illimitable gray stretches of them, arid and quite uninviting," the professor assured him.

"Get this bird, sheriff," muttered Whitey, slanting his head discreetly at a chair wheeled to a halt a little distance away, its occupant a blanketed small man with a huge bald head, the face, gray and hard, showing a livid pallor.

The vehicle moved rather like the triumphal chariot of a conqueror; a severe-looking, liveried man servant wheeled it; Dr. Madden marched gravely beside it, two nurses trailed it, and an anxious young man with a leather portfolio stepped softly at the rear. One nurse tenderly brought the prisoner's shoulders to a closer confinement under the blanket; the other placed a cushion at his back and a water bottle at his feet; Dr. Madden reached for a wrist and became absorbed in the pulse.

"Don't badger me, quite pawing me!" ordered the object of this care in something more like a bark than human speech. Madden relinquished the wrist and, after a slight hesitation, vanished; the nurses fled. Only the youth with the portfolio remained, and he, at a little distance, seemed to doubt if this were wise.

"Well? Well?" It was an inquiring bark of rebuke, creating consternation in the waiting youth. He advanced timorously, drew a stool beside the chariot, opened his portfolio and gave a sheaf of papers to the conqueror, who, after ejecting the cushion from his back, and kicking the hot water bottle away from his feet, took them greedily and began to shuffle the sheets.

Presently he was dictating to the youth, who wrote in the book on his knee. Ben's group could hear the

rumble of his tones and catch the blast of his stormy eyes as, from time to time, they swept the space about him. His words seemed hot with disapproval.

"Somebody catching hell," said Whitey, and Ben agreed.

"Know who that bird is?"

Ben didn't know the bird.

"That's little old Jackson Temple, directing five or six railroads from his wheel chair; got more millions than I got whole bones in me this minute. And ain't he passionate!"

Ben watched the personage. In the throes of dictation even the heavy brows seemed to talk, but at intervals the flow of words would cease, and the erstwhile conqueror would be stricken with a dazed unbelieving awareness of his own collapse. At these times he glanced about him with a puzzled dismay, the look of one dealt a foul blow by something hitherto trusted. The recording youth waited, eyes always on his book, pencil alert.

"He don't know yet how come all this hospital stuff," explained Ben. "He thinks he's just having a funny dream."

The barking would be renewed at a faster tempo, the large mouth curling about the words with a savage relish.

"The professor is missing this," said Whitey. "Hey, prof!" The professor had been dozing and he started awake.

"I heard you. I merely loitered in the purlieus of the conscious, those dim labyrinths of color and confusion." He now enjoyed with the others the vocal dis-

charges and pyrotechnic eyebrows of the dictation. After a while the portfolio was shut upon its treasures of acrimony, and the amanuensis sped off in a relief he but poorly disguised.

For the moment unattended, the now silent dictator glared about him, then waved, rather fiercely it seemed, to the professor, who waved in turn. The stricken magnate grasped the wheels of his chariot and propelled it toward the group.

"Ah, doctor—gentlemen!" He took in Whitey and Ben with a questioning lift of the murky brows. The bark was gone, but must have lain close under the surface of that momentary cordiality, because a moment later he was using it to tell them this was all nonsense. Hospitals were for weaklings—women, children. He believed in them. Hadn't his own money built this wing on which they rested? But that gave them no right to interfere with his business, get his routine all mixed up. All the doctors' fault. They learned a lot of things in Germany and came back here to show off. He wasn't going to stand much more of their silly rot. On this he again abruptly suffered the stricken look; like a trusting child suddenly turned on by a friendly dog.

Nor was he more than a little restored by Ben's hearty agreement as to the doctors who slashed right and left. Ben was voluble about this. They'd never have got him there if he hadn't been light-headed for a minute.

"They badgered me into saying yes," admitted the other victim. "And now they say it was a narrow squeak."

The truth of his complaint—read between his words—was that a man of his importance should not have been subjected to such treatment. His glances at the others told that it might be all right with lesser persons. Ben and Whitey were, technically, quite blameless for this injustice; yet the face of each showed conscious guilt. But the professor tittered, unashamed and heartlessly, and wished to be told if Mr. Temple didn't know he was himself talking nonsense. Did he really believe that biological advantages accrued to one because he knew about bonds and stocks and railroads? Did he expect that—

He was still lecturing when the parade of chairs left, headed by the professor's. Mr. Temple, observing Ben station himself back of Whitey's chair, all at once became a stricken child again; they were leaving him in a dark wood where wild beasts lurked.

"Like to stop at my place a minute?" invited Ben, noticing the man's dejection. The acceptance was eager and instant.

"Would you mind running me down the line first and coming back for your friend?" His harried eyes sought the entrance to the hall down which freedom lay. "They're liable to come back and gang up on me any minute."

"Sure—sure. Never mind me," begged Whitey. Ben took the other chair, and the badgered Temple drew a blanket over his head with the intention of disguising himself. "Step on it," he muttered in a husky whisper when they reached the clear stretch of corridor. Ben stepped on it just as another preciously freighted chair, also being stepped on, turned out a side alley; what

would have been an interesting collision was averted only by the masterly driving of both pilots.

"Good work!" A muffled explosion of applause from beneath the concealing blanket. "Now you got a cleared main line! Let 'er out! Disregard all signals!"

Ben let her out and, except for grazing the leg of a terrified orderly crossing the right of way and blinded by his laden tray, reached haven without further mishap. The pilot leaned against the shut door, panting.

"You must be in rotten shape—all out of condition," criticized the passenger. "A little sprint like that—"

Ben's breathing presently slowed under the other's censorious regard. "My first day out," he explained. "You can't expect me to break any track records when I just been caught off soft feed." In form apology, it was a little acid with protest.

"All right, then; I didn't know." Mr. Temple, graciously accepting the excuse, flung aside the disguising blanket and commanded a glass of water from his host's nurse.

"Got some all-right bourbon there," suggested the host.

"Good! I don't want it, but I'll take it, because I can't have it." This was rendered in the familiar bark.

Ben had recovered now. "Excuse me while I go back for the other load."

"Look out for the turns," warned his guest. "Those curves are all down on the outside—rotten track!"

"This here won't be any limited," Ben assured him. "This has got to be a slow freight, or I'll fetch up in the repair shop."

"Nurses or anyone bawling for me—tell 'em I jumped off the roof." As Ben left, his guest had poured himself a drink and was diluting it with water.

Whitey, under escort at a sedate speed down the corridor, demanded: "Say, sheriff, how'd it feel to be pushing ninety million dollars all in one chair?"

"Like work, that's all," Ben told him shortly. "One of these speed maniacs; no slowing up for crossings. I nearly spilled him and someone else. He's a chancy cuss."

The three were about the little table. Whitey wouldn't be wishing any drink, but Ben took a small one after a defiant glare at Miss Ellis. He had his clothes on now; the legs under him were a man's legs once more, inside the pants of a man; one fussy word from these hospital people—he'd walk out on them.

"This is something like," declared Mr. Temple, tasting his drink.

"Here's how!" Ben drank with him, and they talked.

When Ben returned from taking Whitey to his ward he reported that a general alarm seemed to be out for his remaining guest. Two panicky nurses racing up and down the hall, and that preacher-looking man with the striped vest was walking slow like he had lost his best friend.

"He has, for the moment," said the pleased Mr. Temple, and conferred upon himself another small drink.

When Ben's dinner came, the magnate cordially invited himself to share it, and Miss Ellis, after being warned to keep her head closed about Mr. Temple if she didn't wish to be shot at sunrise, had to go to the diet kitchen for a second piece of lemon pie.

During the succeeding hour Mr. Temple listened to a vivacious account of the past, present and future of the cattle business, its ups and downs as far back as the dry year of '98, when beef on the hoof sold for two cents a pound. In turn, Ben heard what his adroit guest had done to the D. L. & T. in 1910; also how he built a certain cut-off against the advice of all his associates; and to the low-down truth about his operations in a merger of scandalous repute; then to frank intimations of how he meant to put the skids under a certain bunch of Broad Street crooks next week or the week after. Of course, Mr. Carcross would understand that Mr. Temple could not be more precise, not give names.

Mr. Carcross understood and for Mr. Temple's further recreation told him at long length about a protracted litigation involving water rights on the Lone Tree Ranch, from its inception in '84; full of dates, names of judges and the family histories of the litigants unto the third generation—an uninspired and discouraging narrative; but so had been those of Mr. Temple. Neither felt any interest in the talk of the other, but each manfully made a pretense of it.

Soon after eight o'clock a capable band of scouts quieted the general alarm for the hospital's missing guest of honor by running him to earth. The door, thrust decisively open, revealed two frantic nurses, a sad man servant and a stern Dr. Madden, the eyes of all widening with reproach, save only those of the two orderlies with trays. These, it seemed, lurked in the near background merely out of a friendly human interest such as any leisured passer-by might feel.

Mr. Temple, being caught, began volubly to placate

the horde. He had fallen in with an old friend and comrade, and the time had slipped by.

His old friend and comrade hereupon slunk into the bathroom like a dog caught in offense, and the incensed rescuers deported Mr. Temple with no ceremonial pomp whatever. They made a chorus of bitter reproach ere the door was reached, nor did their prisoner venture a glance backward for any formal adieu.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DOYLE, from the shadows, had pleasantly surveyed the scene. Now she giggled as her patient strode boldly from the bathroom.

"It's an outrage that poor cuss couldn't look in and swap the time of day and the price of cows," he grumbled. In a spirit of bravado he swaggered to the table and took a drink he had no wish for. Doyle continued to giggle. Miss Ellis had confided to her of the late guest, "He may be old, but he's very, very magnetic!" Doyle now supplemented this character analysis with a bit of her own: "He's just a bad little boy—and that's all you are."

"Me—I won't stand any more foolishness from hence on from anybody," retorted her patient. "I could walk right out of here now if I wanted to."

"Why don't you then?"

"Well—I don't know any place to go tonight."

"Bed," suggested Doyle, suspecting rightly that he would prove contrary.

"When I get good and ready." He firmly seated himself near the lamp and rattled a twice-read Advertiser. Doyle picked up her knitting. He ignored her for a while, then glanced toward the already sizable rug she worked at.

"What's that tarp going to be for?" he wanted to know.

"It's going to keep some baby warm, I hope."

"Some baby, hey? Say, you talk so much about babies, why don't you get a few of your own?"

She was apparently deaf to this, and he idly watched the white-capped head above the glinting needles.

At last she exclaimed, "Let's!"

He stared at her aghast, exploding finally with a "Huh?"

Doyle arose, impaled the ball of yarn with her needles and stepped to the door. "Come and see something," she invited.

So that was it. Sane on every other subject but babies!

Down the corridor to an elevator, up a floor, along another corridor until Doyle checked a progress that had become furtive. She listened at one door, then softly opened another and beckoned. They were in a small room dimly lit; Ben was conscious of life all about him. He likened it to entering a stable at night—horses breathing, now and then a little moan, faintly fretful, a choking that became a cough, small gurgles that told of content.

"Stock under cover and fed for the night," he said softly.

Doyle turned on a light and went to push open a baize-covered swinging door. "Hello, girls! Don't mind me. I'm showing your nursery to my case."

A middle-aged nurse in white and three trainers in light blue uniforms left the table at which they had been sitting and came to the door.

"She's plain nutty," said the nurse to Ben, and the trainers looked respectful confirmation.

Doyle ignored this. "There, now!" She confronted Ben with triumph aglow in her softened eyes.

Ben was instinctively getting a count—a corral count—on this bunch of stock. They were in what looked like baskets that swung from a rod extending about the room.

"Thirty-eight," he announced.

"Well, you're such a wonderful stockman—what would be your pick of this lot?"

"I've worked at stock shows some, but I never judged human babies. Anyway, I can't tell till you get 'em in the show ring with their blankets off."

Doyle was impatient. "But look! I could tell, right off."

"Ginger Doyle, if you start that bunch up again—" The nurse was menacing, and the trainers looked severe.

Ben stepped closer. Some of this stock was feeding at bottles, avid animal lips curled about rubber nipples. The gurgles he had heard came from these; they were noisy drinkers. Here and there were small pools catching the light; opened eyes staring at him incuriously or sleepily blinking.

Then one of these with opened eyes held him; a plump-faced one, with clenched fist upthrust, had a bold-eyed stare and waved the fist at Ben, with what intention was not to be divined.

"This one," he said, merely hoping to escape further obligation.

"Of course!" applauded Doyle, as if there could have been no reasonable hesitation. "Four months old and the most beautiful baby ever was."

"Oh, you Ginger!" This came from the nurse. "Girls, how often does she say those very words?"

"Every time," chimed the docile trainers.

"But this truly is," insisted Doyle. They both bent to study the prize; Ben extended a finger, and the fist clasped about it.

"Will you look at that?" he whispered.

"All babies do that," the head nurse coldly reminded him. "Monkeys too."

"You and your old monkeys!" reproved Doyle, and Ben didn't for a moment believe the head nurse. This was surely an especial baby. He pulled his finger away, whereupon the baby tightened the bold eyes to wrinkles and bellowed an able protest.

"Now you've done it!" accused the nurse, cocking an anxious ear toward the other baskets. Ben was frightened and restored the finger. It was promptly clutched, and the bold eyes again opened upon him. The trainers tittered nervously. Doyle stood by with clasped hands and a strained gaze. Ben's back began to ache. But presently the bold eyes closed and, finger by finger, the stout fist relaxed.

"Now beat it before you start something else," ordered the nurse. So they did this.

Doyle waited outside the door, finger to her lips. In her secret, evil heart, she was sorry they hadn't started something else. She liked her babies in action. But discouraged by the continued silence in that celestial room, she led the way back.

"Got a voice like a bull calf—a long yearling, at that."

"Hasn't he, though!"

"Got a grip like a vise."

"You should see his feet and his legs and his beautiful straight back."

"Chest sticks out like a shelf." These speeches of Ben's were undertoned by an excited, dry chuckling. Doyle's voice was lilting.

They still chattered about the points of this surpassing baby after Ben was in bed. The day had been exhausting with excitements, and this last bit had left him sort of weak and jumpy. Doyle, again with her knitting, explained in a voice she tried to make judicial that she must have examined at least one thousand babies in her time, but that this one stood above them all by reason of comeliness and muscular endowments. Ben did not question the appraisal.

Doyle fell silent, knitting for moments with a sort of grim intensity, then all at once becoming immobile, her hands freezing in the very play of her needles while she gazed off through the wall. Presently those smoldering maternal fires would again permit her to knit.

"What's its name?" Ben asked. She knitted on for a long time, then spoke while her needles kept to their play: "What difference? The poor little mother had to go—never saw her child. And all she left was one letter." Little stretches of knitting interspersed these fragments. She was telling it by jerks: "The letter said he was going away—not coming back. Some worthless scamp. Hadn't even married her. Serve him right never to see his child—not that he'd ever wish to—sailing off to South America. I'd like to shoot him dead—just like that." Doyle's right hand went out to operate a presumably lethal weapon. Her burning glance had flitted to Ben at each of her pauses—accusingly, he was shocked to note. What was she blaming him for?

Doyle knitted on, her lips hard set in a grim face.

Ben thought, "She certainly would gun that lad." Women could be a lot more vicious than men. He thought: "A bull shuts his eyes when he charges, but a cow keeps them open. That's the reason they have bullfights—they'd never get any fellow that savvies cows to be a cow fighter. I'd hate to be in the way of this buckskin when she started; she's knitting off her mad at this kid's father." Doyle stopped knitting, and her face was again softened, her eyes eager, her voice thrilling on low notes.

"You remember your tree? How you took it up and planted it and nursed it and watched it and loved it?" He nodded from the pillow.

"It wasn't your tree, but you took it and made it yours. Then if someone had come along and cut it down, you'd have been—" She brandished a knitting needle and was a menace to the vandal. Ben didn't know why, but his spine was tingling. Doyle was frozen once more; then abruptly became dynamic: "That's my very own baby!" She snapped out the words with a low intensity that again made his spine tingle—even the roots of his hair this time.

He turned on his pillow, ill at ease. She said the kid was hers and he knew it wasn't, but still, if she kept on saying so, he would be the last man to deny it.

"You took your tree and planted it and nursed it and loved it," she said, still not knitting.

"You get on with that knitting," he gruffly ordered. Why should she keep bringing his tree into her crazy talk?

"It's for him—this nice warm woolly. Funny," she added, "I didn't know that myself till just now."

After this she got on with her knitting as she had been told to, though with hesitations for rapt peering through the wall. Her needles were clicking regularly when the wearied patient sank at last into his hard-earned sleep.

He was up at dawn, dressed again. He stood, awaiting his breakfast at a window looking to the lighted east. Below him spread a patch of green lawn with rosebushes trimming its edge. A kind of silvery stillness lay over it, and the rose blooms seemed to be waiting for something, all hushed and listening. This was the hour he liked best at Lone Tree. He would be getting on a sound-backed saddle-horse, riding down the fields to look at about a thousand white-faced, stiff-legged calves, nuzzling their watchful and fighty mothers. And he'd look around sharp for a possible weak cow that had slunk her calf.

But just now he was far from this home idyl. He could scent the fragrance of the roses through the open window. Pale fires in the east and that waiting silvery hush below. He breathed it and was joyous, exulting in the old strength come back. Long-trail—yeah—but still good going. Then a sturdy figure of a man trundled a lawn-mower onto the grass down there, a monstrous clattering grasshopper that ate the grass and spewed it out in green spray. That waiting hush of dawn was clattered to bits and gone with April's golden laughter.

When Doyle was leaving she stood a moment at the window where sun rays made a fiery splendor of her hair. Her eyes were sometimes blue, he had thought, but in that light they were greenish, and they were alive now with furtive designs. She held up the rug

of gray wool that had a wide blue stripe across each end.

"It's finished," she told him. "It's to keep my tree warm. My tree," she repeated with a significance that made Ben uneasy. She was a secret sort, he reflected. But she was gone, and Miss Ellis was there, rattling the dishes on his breakfast tray.

Then, late that morning, Ben Carcross, in the full tide of returning vigor, suffered a blow that threatened to make more trouble for Dr. Madden. A delayed letter from Addie had come, announcing her probable sailing. That was alarming enough, but a wireless arrived almost with the letter, disclosing that all the known Pettigrews, together with Mrs. St. John Smythe and her son Hercule, were at that moment in mid-Atlantic on a fast boat. Ben could see no other way out of it. He must have an immediate relapse. This was Tuesday. The boat would dock Thursday morning.

It meant quick work. But they wouldn't find him defenseless. He'd be bedfast again. Of course not enough worse to keep any of the family with him. He spent the rest of the morning anxiously wondering about symptoms. He fumbled dispiritedly with the letter and the wireless and with a Paris picture card from General Pettigrew imaging Notre Dame, of which monument the general had been pleased to write: "This is one of the world's historic structures. You would find it very instructive." That was like the general—always thoughtful, always hunting up things that would be instructive. Still, Notre Dame was no help in this emergency.

He made a beginning by telling Miss Ellis that he felting shooting pains "right across here"—his hands posed in a general embrace of his mid-section. Miss Ellis ordered him to bed while she would call Dr. Madden. The pains at that moment ceased to shoot, and the sufferer manfully announced that he would stay in his clothes for the present. He was able to eat a hearty luncheon, but the pains shot again in the afternoon, stopping only when Miss Ellis approached the telephone. However, there had been enough pains so that tomorrow she would remember them.

At the out-of-doors session with his friends that day he was no longer care-free, but showed himself morose even about the cattle enterprise. It was no business for a white man; he laughed sardonically when the professor said he had always understood it to be a gainful pursuit.

Jackson Temple, after dictating venomously for an hour, tried to join Ben in his room again, but was thwarted by the sad man servant, who had been set to spy upon him.

Ben took no interest in this failure, nor did he invite the professor in. He kept Whitey long enough only to inform him that General Pettigrew's private study was to have some lovely Renaissance tapestries. He had thought Whitey might be able to tell him what the hell Renaissance tapestries were and why a study for the general.

Whitey thought a study was a place to study in; about Renaissance tapestries he was unsatisfactory.

"You'll have to bed me down early tonight," Ben told Doyle. "These pains been getting me, right here."

Doyle, more prying about the pains than Ellis, drew conflicting testimonies from him. He wished the pains to be some place that wouldn't require another operation, and this, he found, might not be so easy. Doyle suggested several possible operations that the curiously shifting pains might indicate an immediate need for; she was especially glib about one that she called posterior gastroenterostomy; much simpler than it sounded, she assured him; merely taking a few reefs in the anterior wall of the stomach to make it smaller and held higher.

Ben perceived the need for extreme caution. He became certain only that the pains were "shooting" and that they kind of shot around all over the place. He was pleased to note that at last he had her puzzled. But she would report to Madden that he had suffered. She persisted so long about his pains that he diverted her at last by deliberately mentioning the young of the human species. A few casual words sufficed.

Late that evening, the completed rug under an arm, she slipped out, luminous-eyed, returning with something in the rug which she carefully deposited on Ben's bed. A fold turned back revealed a slumbering very softly breathing infant with a mottled pink face.

"There, now!" murmured Doyle proudly. "And don't joggle it!" For Ben had instantly begun to joggle it.

"It's the same one," he announced.

"Of course it is!"

"Sure! I can read its marks." They studied the sleeping thing.

"His lovely, lovely brow!" whispered Doyle.

"Got a brain on him, all right," agreed Ben, hovering a hand above the fuzzed head.

"You're dying to touch him," guessed Doyle.

"Sure I am," he admitted.

They gloated in silence; the sleeper stirred, gurgled twice, swallowed constrictively, and began to wave both clenched fists. The bold eyes slowly opened, wavering from one to the other of the bending faces. After a moment's blank stare, feet and fists were all waved rather aimlessly; then the mouth contorted to emit the short-breathed beginnings of a cry that would gather to an appalling climax. Doyle collected the protestant into her arms, replacing the rug about the uneasy body, and sat in the chair to hold it. Quiet strangely ensued—some mother sorcery of Doyle's.

"Those old goofs upstairs"—Doyle meant the nurse and trainers, only the head nurse being at all old, and probably none of the four really a goof—"they don't even know I took him. I'll prowl him back."

She returned, reporting the goofs still in ignorance of her prowling.

"My tree!" There she went again with that tree talk. And she kept calling the baby hers. "Queer it is," she went on, "but I've often thought about poor Joseph—our Blessed Mary's husband, you know. Of course he adored that babe in the manger, but how Joseph must have wished it could have been all his!"

"Well, I never thought much about that," said Ben uncomfortably.

"I thought about it just now," Doyle brightly continued. "You never had anything but a tree, and you were wanting this little son."

"Oh!" Ben was at a loss.

"Didn't I know it? Very well, he's ours—yours and mine."

Ben's spine and the roots of his hair tingled a warning. This copper-top was egging him on to something. As if he didn't have trouble enough already! He tried to go back to the trouble, but found himself wishing he had poked a finger at that baby so it might have been funnily grabbed.

"You see, it'll belong to us!"

That nutty Doyle. She was one of those that would odd things along till they sounded even. He didn't dare answer her last speech and pretended to sleep before he really did so.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MADDEN practically spoiled the day for him. His nurses had heard about the pains without too much alarm. Madden wasn't alarmed, but he was more curious than, it seemed to Ben, he had any right to be. Ben had believed that enough pains to keep him in bed might cause a little pleasant conversation. But Madden listened without a word, then began a process of prodding. He became, Ben was glad to discover, darkly puzzled by pains that persisted in keeping ahead of where he poked. They at length made him impatient.

Ben determined to have no more pains if this was the way it worked. These people might get him under again and go to slashing. It was simpler, he saw now, to be merely weak. This Madden went after a person's pains like a smell dog after a fox, and it was nobody's business but his own if he wanted to hole up here until he got his bearings. There remained but the minor details of convincing Miss Ellis that, with all his pains, he would need a large steak at midday and another at night. He overcame this difficulty with considerable fire of manner.

Doyle, that night, merely looked at him when he told about the pains. He broke off his narrative in some confusion and with a conviction that he wasn't putting anything over on Doyle.

But, anyhow, the next day at two o'clock, there he was, feebly on his back, when Addie and the girls came

tiptoeing in—Addie and Gail and Vannie, with grave faces and muffled voices of greeting. He fluttered one weak hand, but closed his eyes while they stood in a hushed row at his bedside. Not until Miss Ellis had found seats for them did he venture to look. One brief glance almost made him forget his condition, and he propped himself on an elbow the better to observe what Paris had done to them. Miss Ellis ran forward to put another pillow behind him. Good work. He'd remember her for it; though at that, the cute little scamper was just trying to show off before company.

Seeing that he was not actually moribund, the others broke out in concert. Why hadn't he cabled? And what had he meant by saying he was in a hospital with a bad cold? But now they were here and how did he like these clothes and their hair?

"Arrwgh!" Ben muttered non-committally.

And wasn't it grand about Mrs. St. John Smythe and Hercule, the two most adorable persons in the whole world? They knew simply everything. The mother was now making a round of the smart New York shops, Hercule was getting adorable things through the custom-house, and papa and Presh were sightseeing. And when could he start West?

Ben let the question go by, still at his troubled staring; Addie was north of forty-five, Gail was thirty, and Vannie, the baby, was certainly twenty-eight. But to Ben's dazzled eyes and in that kindly light the three all looked to be the same age and like pictures he had studied without belief in a fashion magazine treasured by Miss Ellis. Their hair used to be different; now it was short and a pale yellow; their faces powdered and painted; their lips boldly reddened until one mouth was

not different from another. And there was a care-free bestowal of silk-clad legs which he did not remember to have seen equaled before.

His vision cleared as they talked; there was, beyond doubt, the old Addie dimly back of that flaunting front; the old Gail, always a little timid about everything; and the old Vannie who was by nature a minx—yet a conservative minx. He was placing them, with the yellow hair, the curiously shaded eyes, and the mouths by some trick of pigment made to look of one pattern.

Gail was trying to tell him something thrilling about a cathedral, and Vannie was fitting a cigarette into a long green holder ringed with gold. Addie choked off the cathedral speech for matters more immediately practical:

“Wasn’t it luck—the Smythes dropping everything to come over and start us right! Marianne is such a darling, and Hercule is perfectly adorable—the smartest thing! He has such wonderful connections on the Continent; knows where to get everything cheap. They’ve promised to do the house.”

“Do the house?”—blankly.

“But yes, do the rooms.”

Ben’s gaze was still blank, because one not-too-active Portuguese girl had done the rooms in the old house.

“Furnish them, decorate them—panels, tapestries, furniture, rugs, pictures, objects *dar*. You’ll be surprised, really, when you see the stuff Hercule picked up for us at such wonderful prices out of old palaces. Lots of them museum pieces, amazing bargains, on account of him knowing the owners so intimately.”

“A tea-wagon?” suggested Ben knowingly.

"Oh, my dear, positively not!" This was Vannie, before Addie had been able to reply. "Tea-wagons wouldn't do at all with our period stuff."

Addie regained control; she had progressed so far beyond tea-wagons, it seemed, as to make an explanation needless. "And the dearest thing happened. Hercule actually had poppa painted."

"Painted?" Ben was trying to picture General Pettigrew being painted.

"Done in oils. Hercule happened to take him to the studio of a friend one day—one of the really worthwhile painters—and he was so struck with poppa's powerful face that he said he simply must get to work on a portrait of him. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so he did, and it's a stunning thing."

"You'll positively rave about it," Vannie put in, adjusting a fresh cigarette.

"And knowing Hercule so well," Addie resumed, "this painter chap did the portrait for actually half his regular price—only three thousand dollars."

"But it was on condition," Gail reminded, "that poppa wouldn't speak of it so other people would think they could get their portraits cheap. And don't forget to tell Ben about our busts."

"Oh, I nearly forgot." This was Addie again. "The dearest little old-lady French sculptor that Hercule has known for ages called us the three graces and she said she positively must do busts for us; and of course it was silly—her calling us that—but we let her, and they are remarkable pieces of art, Hercule says, and dirt-cheap on account of her being such a close friend of his."

"In bronze," explained Vannie. "The peachiest bronze."

"Of course, they don't look much like us," added Gail. "They kind of look more like art in the larger sense." She brandished an explaining thumb.

"Oh, but of course," agreed Addie.

"And would you believe it," Gail wished to know, "Hercule is really an American, but you couldn't tell it on him because he looks so perfectly, utterly French, and never learned English till after he was a big boy. Even now he'll burst into the sweetest French without ever thinking. You'll love the way he does it."

"And he knows the mode trend in practically everything. He took us to a marvelous little hat shop and picked out quantities of the smartest hats for us almost for nothing, because of knowing the people. You simply have to know the mode trend or you'll be buying something wrong—terribly wrong." This was Vannie.

"Sounds like you'd done nothing but save money over there," suggested Ben.

"Oh, of course, all in all we spent a lot of money," admitted Addie. "I suppose I'm drefle extravagant, aren't I?" Ben waved aside the possible extravagance to wonder about "aren't I." They all said it quite often, he noticed.

Followed talk of strange furnishings, of an adorable day bed for Addie. He wondered if she were about to become an invalid. "Day bed" didn't sound so good. And all the rooms were going to be period rooms. What were period rooms and what was a mode trend? And Addie was hoping he hadn't yet got anything in the way of semiformal day wear, because Hercule

would be so delighted to help him. He was able to quiet Addie's fears on this point. Vannie was explaining that there were a couple of Louvres in Paris, one being a shop, though Hercule had never let them buy anything there on account of not having met the people.

Ben managed a swift wink at Miss Ellis and fell weakly back on his pillow. That was all he could stand the first time. Miss Ellis stepped forward and warned the callers that her patient must not be further excited. The voices were hushed; they kissed his forehead and tiptoed out with whispered promises of tomorrow. As he lay with closed eyes after they left, Miss Ellis picked up Vannie's cigarette-case of gold filigree and withdrew quietly to the bathroom to learn what they were smoking in Paris.

Ben was congratulating himself on the wisdom of his relapse. This would have been a nice jam for a cowman of simple tastes to get caught in. He studied a card Addie had bestowed on him at parting. It told of a New York shop owned by one of Hercule's dearest friends where Ben could secure an amazing reduction on all prices. In chaste engraving the card announced:

DISTINGUISHED IMPORTATIONS COMPRISING
EXCLUSIVE MATERIALS FOR THE CUSTOM-
TAILORING, SHIRT AND CRAVAT-MAKING
DEPARTMENTS

With dignified fervor it also mentioned "Sportswear and other gentlemen's apparel developed by this establishment for a particular clientele." Sportswear!—golf pants—something to make a horse shy when you went to get on it! And getting your neckties made to order!

You probably had to have a specialist's prescription for them. Not Ben Carcross. When he bought a neck-tie he picked it out in a window.

That evening Miss Ellis had another earful of hot dirt for Doyle, voiced behind the closed door of the bathroom.

"They're all cold-nosed; if you ask me, they're a set of these blond Eskimos you read about. Colder than penguins! Only God never meant a one of them to be blond. Wearing a million dollars' worth of clothes they can't forget. Me, I can put on my squirreline and appear to forget I'm wearing it. That's the test, lady. But not these dames. They're so busy thinking what's on their backs they can't remember what's on their minds. But I want to tell you there was one water-cress-green ensemble that this wage slave would sell herself body and soul for."

The departure of Miss Ellis restored a cathedral calm to the room, and Doyle went to her patient. He lay a moment silent; then his eyes flashed open and he demanded: "Ever see old dead circus bills on a wall—all torn and rained on and faded? They used to be gay—red and yellow and blue. But now—well, that's me."

"I don't believe a word of it," Doyle cheered him. "You're just a bad little boy." Doyle thought all men were just bad little boys.

"You don't know the mode trend," he told her gloomily.

That night he loitered a long time on the foreshore of his sea of sleep. Doyle, after an absence, told him, "Our baby has gained two whole ounces." But Ben

scarce heard this sensational report. He was wondering if he would really rave over the portrait of poppa, wondering if it showed his watch chain, and if the general would study in his study. And then about skirts. Stagged pants had long been the mode trend on cow ranches, and now the women had stagged their skirts—Vannie had worn a candid dress that showed all her ribs and most of her legs.

A curious, lost-dog feeling whimpered at the back of his mind. How the girls had yessed Addie, how she had backed their play right along, all the way. Shoulder to shoulder. Uh-huh. A body did need some human standbys in this vale of tears.

Well, he'd better be getting some sleep so he could react tomorrow. He knew what the word meant now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEN had meant to brace himself with one snifter of the excellent bourbon just before the actual destruction of his peace that day. Being uncertain about the hour, he employed this ruse too early and felt it wise to fortify himself a second time. He had just met what seemed to be an urgent need for a third prop when a tapping at the door heralded the three male members of the embarrassing entourage.

Miss Ellis ushered in Hercule St. John Smythe, attended by General Pettigrew and his son, Presh. They came on tiptoe, with little thoughtful noises, until, perceiving the object of their solicitude to be not only awake but revealing more vivacity than they had been led to expect, they burst into greetings, cordial, but still subdued as for a mortuary.

Hercule was introduced in the general's richest organ tones, and came to press Ben's hand with lively solicitude in his agreeable young face.

Miss Ellis received a hat from Hercule, a hat and gloves from the general and a hat from Presh. Presh would have relinquished stick and gloves, but retained them when he saw that Hercule did this. They found seats and Ben was quick to observe that Paris and the great world had wrought upon the two men as it had upon the females of his family.

Both the general and Presh were attired like Hercule, and Hercule was a trim silhouette in black and

white and pearl, suitable for hospital civilities. The waistcoats, spats and gloves were a pearl-gray, the sticks of dark Malacca. Ben would have expected this thoughtfulness of regalia from Hercule, who knew everything that was right. But Presh! When last seen, Presh had carried neither gloves nor stick and had pridefully flaunted a seal-brown Chugwater hat with a lofty crown and what cow hands, fussy about their millinery, would speak of as a "high-peak pinch."

His present head-covering was an ignoble black derby. Further, with the Chugwater creation Presh had worn a suit, not made for him, with an alarming wide stripe in yellow and brown, purplish shoes with swollen toes and a fawnskin vest; and in his pale blue cravat a tie pin set with the rattle of a deadly snake. Presh had come on. His mouse-colored hair was slicked back in the way Miss Ellis fancied, and elaborated by a wave Ben could not remember to have seen before. In his old scenic investiture Presh had been proud and upstanding; now, with his unsteady pale eyes, his prominent nose seeming more than prominent because of his chin that never had been, he was uncomfortable and scared of Hercule. Presh was twenty-five, but still callow and at times distressed by the pimples of adolescence.

The general had altered less; he seemed, in his richly decorous garb, merely to have acquired a just setting. He was a large man with a large head, denuded of hair on top, the lower remnants artfully trained to hide much of the bareness and tinted to the handsome blue-black of the raven's wing. The general's eyes were prominent, and his wide and able lips with their con-

trolled curves bespoke the mouth of a born orator. He had perhaps taken on weight, his majestic face being now a bit jowly and the equatorial bulge slightly more insistent. His dignity was unimpaired, however, and he sat stiffly erect in his chair, his hands resting on his stick, his owlish yellow eyes seeking Ben with a look of severe encouragement.

There had as yet been no chance for the general to talk, because Hercule was doing quite all of that. While Ben was mentally betting that the general's feet hurt him in those patent-leather shoes, he was aware that Hercule rattled agreeably of New York, which had but now come under his notice, and about the wondrous purchases it had been his privilege to consummate for the embellishment of the Château Carcross. The vivacious young man uttered his English with chiseled precision. He seemed gifted with tireless energy, and must deserve, Ben concluded, all the praise Addie and the girls had bestowed upon him. Only after a time of the fluent discourse did Ben suspect that Hercule was under a misapprehension regarding the cattle business.

"You have a sporting estate—yes? How jolly!" The young man appeared to believe that Ben Carcross dabbled in ranching as a rich man's hobby. "Top dog, that!" he cried with delight when Ben named his acreage. Top dog, it seemed for all manner of country sports; for whippet racing and racing with horses—"mustangs," Hercule said—for coursing with the hounds, for tennis and golf.

Golf on the Lone Tree! Ben let it go. Then the young man frightened cold beads of sweat to his brow.

After a considering view of Miss Ellis in the background, he outbreathed a long "ah!" of apparent understanding and reached out to poke Ben with his correct stick. "Ah, ha! *Blagueur*, joker that you are—not nearly so ill as you would have us believe, hanh!"

"Hey, how's that?" demanded the guilty Ben, in alarm.

"You slacker! But you are pretending. You could be up now, today, with a giant's stride, but you malingere here. Ah-ha! You fool some people all the time, but not this one any time. Come now! That charming *garde malade!*" Hercule here kissed all the finger-tips of one hand in the direction of Miss Ellis. The intimation was plain.

Presh tittered, and the general rumbled a tolerant laugh, as from one man of the world to others. Ben was relieved and smiled foolishly under the arch cane of his accuser.

Turning lightly from this playful interlude, Hercule voiced his matured impressions of the United States, describing it as "of course, a land of dollar-chasers."

Ben had to admit this. They certainly chased dollars in the cow country. He sold his animals at simply wonderful reductions only when compelled to. He had never parted with them at half-price out of friendly feeling for the purchaser—as Hercule's tradesmen friends so charmingly parted with their own treasures. Hercule described a choice oak-paneled interior he had ravished from a friend's *château* for a song.

Ben wondered, "An interior of what?" but it wouldn't do to ask.

As Hercule prattled, Ben turned to feast his eyes

again on Presh and the general. He had been wont to speak of Presh in private as rabbit-faced—not infrequently as rabbit-brained. He was looking all of that now, copying Hercule's loll of negligent ease with an effort all too apparent. Ben wanted to laugh at Presh; then it occurred to him that those last snifters of bourbon might be blamed for this impulse. He must be careful.

He flashed his gaze to the general, whom he had never found mirth-provoking and for whom he had a tremendous respect. The general, he knew, was now on parade—he seemed to be signing himself, "Rufus Gideon Pettigrew, Educator and Publicist," as he signed his letters to an often unreceptive press. True, the Branlock Advertiser was not inappreciative of his pen on matters of national import, but too many of the so-called molders of public opinion in metropolitan centers were not alive to their best interests. Of course, there had been the letter printed in the New York Times in 1918, a clipping of this from one of the dozen purchased issues of that journal being now, surely, in the general's pocketbook—somewhat frayed, it was to be surmised, from constant handling by Europeans to whose attention it would have been drawn. Ben tried unavailingly to remember what the letter was about. He felt a sudden flood of sympathy for a great man too long cheated of recognition, and he broke in upon Hercule's chatty repurchase of some Louis XV chairs to ask about this letter.

"Ah, yes, yes," boomed the general. "But the journal you speak of has apparently come under another management since I first appeared in its columns."

That very morning the general had gone to the office of the journal to recall himself as an old contributor and to suggest a series of articles on the European debt situation by one who had recently studied it at first hand. And what was the result? The general had, to put it bluntly—no use mincing words—been put off by some officious jackanapes underling, who, with the coolest effrontery, had even pretended not to recall the general's former contribution. The general was hurt, but dignified; Ben was hurt and less dignified. He hotly declared that except for the Branlock Advertiser there wasn't a paper in the country not controlled by Wall Street crooks. Even the Advertiser, he added, according to well-founded rumor, had let itself be bought over in that matter of the B. & J. ditch litigation.

In spite of this passing cynicism, Ben was feeling friendly to everyone and, when the ladies came, almost too gay for his supposed indisposition. It was hard to suppress a warming glow of pride when the room began to seem crowded; it was he they were making such a fuss about, the smart shops and wonderful bargains and Hercule's open-handed friends abandoned for the moment out of worry over him.

Mrs. St. John Smythe was being shown off by Addie and the girls. She looked to Ben's eyes somehow smarter—if he had the right word for it—than the other women, even if her severe black-and-white effects were less colorful. Clearly, she was the mother of Hercule with his dark hair and the gray, rather smallish, but agreeably shrewd eyes; she had his air of untiring quickness; his birdlike perkings of the head as she talked. Ben thought they were indeed a

wonderful pair. He was now thinking everyone wonderful. Addie and the girls became wonderful—even Presh. On his bed Ben was holding carnival. He would have liked another nip of the bourbon before the glow should die, but he knew it wouldn't do. Once he thought, noting how the eyes of Hercule's mother were again and again seeking his, that she was making a few guesses about him—going through him with a dark lantern.

"Your quaint America," she was saying, "so enamored of bigness and the superlative. Really it is droll. The loftiest skyscrapers in the world, the largest rivers, the highest mountains—the coldest, the hottest in the world—the most murders, the greatest floods, the greatest fires— Did I not read with my own eyes in a western journal a winsome boast of the crookedest railway in the world? And but this morning one of your important cities naively prides itself on having the largest electric-lighted sign in the world—to advertise some person's oil or treacle, I fancy it was."

"Well, of course, Europe can't have everything," Ben kindly pointed out. Addie and Vannie murmured reprovingly, "Oh, Ben!" and the talk ran again to the enticing topic of wondrous furnishings for the Château Carcross. Hercule's mother supposed there were no smart shops in the far-western Wheelock—was it?

"Branlock—and smart shops! Oh, my dear!" This was Addie, and Ben caught the intention.

"Well, now," he began helpfully, "maybe you don't know it, but the last time I was in Branlock the B. and J. Store had got in one of these wax women, and she was wearing a very pretty red dress in the window."

"Ben! How absurd!" It was Vannie this time, but

Ben, with three drinks, was not to be called absurd. "It was a smart red dress, I tell you, with blue stockings and the skirt staggered right up to the limit."

"Staggered?" exclaimed both Hercule and his mother. The modish connotation was patiently explained with commiserating glances at Ben, and the talk tactfully diverted to some adorable costume jewelry worn by Mrs. St. John Smythe. They were all smoking cigarettes, unmindful of the tormented eyes of Miss Ellis, who wished to smoke, but could not bring herself to leave the room. Hercule, the enterprising, chatted of a New York connection already formed which had enabled him that very morning to purchase a wing chair with ball-and-claw feet for only seven hundred dollars; amazingly below its actual value; but Hercule knew how to make these little savings.

His mother's competent eyes had not failed to take stock of Miss Ellis, discreetly withdrawn from the group, and when they had done this their glance fluttered lightly over Ben. She flung a French phrase to Hercule, whose reply, also in French, was achieved entirely with his eloquent shoulders. Thereupon the mother trustfully hoped that Ben would not long be confined to his couch of pain.

Ben was on the point of declaring that right then he was ready to leave any hospital in the world with bells on, but, fortunately, overcame this bourbon-inspired bravado.

"I'm still pretty frail—far from a well man," he maintained.

"I see—I see," said Mrs. St. John Smythe, again cheering him with her eyes after the slightest side

glance at Miss Ellis. Did she not know men after all these years—she, a woman of the world?

Addie was reminding Ben not to forget those darling fashion-tailored models at the establishment of Hercule's old and valued friend.

Ben merely mumbled at this. A disclosure of the brutal truth about him was as yet a scandal of the unread future—that day when both Hercule and his mother would bluntly assure a dismayed Mrs. Carcross that her husband was not and never would be style-conscious. All was yet falsely tranquil, and Ben in his new elation had the radio give them some music.

Hercule danced with Vannie skilfully over a square yard of the polished floor, and afterward confessed his distaste for the dance tune. "Like all your modern music, trivial," he criticized. Ben eagerly inquired if he had ever heard "Swanee River," and Hercule said yes; and many others—far too many others possessed only of a geographic significance. Hercule became impassioned: "You shall not find with us any song like, 'My Little Red House in the East of Switzerland,' 'Carry Me Back to the Far South Along the Riviera,' 'When it Shall be Rutabaga Time in Upper Silesia.' But no, we are not so topographical, as if you were reading an atlas. And besides, the music of your songs about rivers and regions is so full of quotations."

"How true! So little of it original!" murmured Gail, while Hercule's mother fondly drew him to perch on the arm of her chair.

"French songs are all about some gal or other," suddenly announced Presh. The abruptness of this, his

conversational début, so flustered Presh that he dropped his stick and gloves.

"At-a-garçon!" cried Hercule, laughing shrilly. "You see"—he beamed upon the assemblage—"already I learn to commit American slang."

"Enough, enough, Monsieur Papillon!" chid his mother with quite broadly acted severity. "I call this monster Mr. Butterfly," she explained, "because he flutters through the world alighting here a moment, pausing there a moment—" She gestured Hercule's airy fluttering. "Never a care, and so aimless! How I have tried to make him be serious, but he will have nothing of it; one dollar, one franc, is but a tiresome word to him, and the things run through his fingers like the waters of a stream. Still I must tell you that he has a vein, this stormy petrel; though you might never suspect it, truly he has a vein." She delicately patted Hercule's girlish cheek, and he kissed the hand amid audible inhalations of sympathy from Addie and the girls.

Ben, a little miffed, felt a wayward wish to see Hercule at that moment astride a colt that had never been sat on. It might be true that his countrymen were dollar-chasers, not carelessly open-handed like Hercule and his friends, but we did have some right pretty songs. Still, this was a bright kid, and it was certainly comical the way he would screw and twist his face around to represent different emotions.

And he must remember that "fortnight" was just a way of saying two weeks. Addie and the girls were all calling two weeks a fortnight, as if they had never had any other name for them. And he was going to

have a study of his own in that new house, or *château*, as Hercule called it. He wasn't sure the word "*château*" would take any deep root in Branlock. "*Mansion*" was rather the word there, especially if you had a cement elk or two in the front yard. Anyway, that wing chair with the ball-and-claw feet would be fine in his study. He had a pleasing vision of a wing chair in full flight. It seemed to him that he had always wished to have a study—in which to study—with a wing chair to make it lively.

In the flush of this inspiration he interrupted Hercule, who was speaking of some old bits he meant to pick up the next day, announcing that he himself had some old bits he would be glad to show Hercule. Addie tried to hush him, but he persisted. Didn't he have a desk with a roll-top bought well over twenty years ago, and a swivel chair, cane-seated, every bit as old as the desk, and a center table, black walnut with bunches of fruit carved on its legs and with a marble top? The top had been broken that night they had the party for Bill Hepburn, who got quarrelsome with Doc Snell for a minute, but nobody could say it wasn't an old table. He glared especially at Addie, and forthwith glibly hummed a few bars of "*My Old Kentucky Home*" just to show Hercule something.

Addie suddenly narrowed her eyes upon him. "Ben Carcross, I bet you could get out of that bed this minute and be as well as anybody! Ever since we've been in this room you've had one of those smiles that could be buttoned around the back of your neck."

The St. John Smythes exchanged one shining glance at this; the others raised inquiring eyebrows.

Ben cowered. "That's all you know about it." His voice, lately swelling in native balladry, was weak and edged with pain. His shifting glance, finding Miss Ellis, mutely begged help.

That capable girl came with her thermometer and he closed his guilt-revealing eyes as the magic tube found its place. They couldn't ace him out that easy.

"He has these terrible pains quite often," explained Miss Ellis in her sick-room whisper. Addie regained the continental poise from which she had briefly lapsed into the home or ranch manner.

"You poor dear!" she murmured. "But you did look so fit."

Ben removed the tube long enough to say, "It's like a fit when that pain takes me right across here."

"Perhaps—" suggested Mrs. St. John Smythe, rising.

"By all means," confirmed the general, also rising. "The man is indeed far from well."

"You're quite sure we can't do anything?" asked Addie, her conscience hurting.

"I'll have to fight it out alone," he told her, concluding with a pitiful moan.

"The dear man is in very, very excellent hands," declared Hercule, winking at Ben. "If he doesn't soon recover we shall stop the rogue's pocket money."

They rustled softly out after the hasty bestowal of cigarette ends, a quick scanning of make-up in compact mirrors.

When the door had closed upon the last of them—it was Vannie in her shimmering dove-gray frock, who tiptoed back for cigarette-case and gloves—Ben

flouted the decencies; he kicked viciously at his covers, called for a long drink and one of his long cigars.

Miss Ellis reported spicy bits to Doyle that evening. The French boy was top dog himself and didn't have to look at a girl twice to let her know what he was thinking about; he'd certainly be a swell dish to party with. He was Mr. Fresh though; kidding the old boy that he was two-timing the wife with her, Ellis.

"The idea!" she finished. "And that chief of the blond Eskimos, say, how she does hate gals with these lithe, boyish figures. She says they don't look so feminine and almost all of them got T. B. from starving their curves down. But she says the womanly woman is coming back. That's the only kind word she gets from her bathroom scales. And her with a new-art wave that set her back nineteen-fifty. But she's just a girl that men forget. Wouldn't it splash you!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEN broke crackers into his soup that night and derived a new pleasure from this disobedience to the rules governing nice people. No Addie there to warn him it wasn't done. It simply was done and he was doing it. He crumbled seven of the crackers into his bowl and dusted his hands with a needless flourish. If only Addie could be brought to see that he was hopeless! He couldn't ever get cultured up to the standards of lady folks that had come into money.

He had left the hated but protective bed to sit up for his dinner, and he continued in the big chair to smoke his cigar. It was peaceful with all of them gone. Smoking thus, he thought about money—that there was a trick to it. Too little—or too much. It could do the same thing to you either way. If a man wasn't a prosperous citizen, making enough to give his folks what they wanted, well, that hombre didn't rate one-two-three with them. And the other way around, if money happened to him—a big flood of money—it seemed to take his place, with 'em; shove him off the map.

Tricky stuff. Some people seemed to want money so they could have things other people couldn't have. If everybody could have the other things, about half of these wouldn't be wanted by anybody. He thought of Hercule, the butterfly, rushing around Europe, teasing his old friends to sell a lot of things to his new

friends at half-price, that most folks wouldn't want at any price if everyone could have them for the asking. He'd bet dollars to doughnuts Addie didn't really want an oak-paneled interior; it didn't sound attractive. Once she had loudly wanted a tea-wagon and now she didn't. All pretty queer.

And Presh? He was sure Presh would be a blanket Indian again, once he got back to the reservation; the world hadn't seen the last of that fawnskin vest and the Chugwater hat with the high-peak pinch. What Presh really wanted wasn't a long yellow cigarette-holder or period pants or a study. He wanted someone to set him up in a garage business with the agency for a good-selling car.

And the general? In the weaving blue of his smoke cloud he reviewed the general's placid life at the ranch—sitting out in the sun in the old busted armchair, his shirt collar open, his belt loosened, needing a shave, one slippered foot patiently rocking a cradle while he read the *Scientific American*, in almost every issue of which he found where someone had beaten him to one of his own inventions; at least he had had the same idea, only he hadn't quite worked it out. In the cradle would be a keg of new moonshine, and it was the general's own inspiration to rock it to a premature old age by giving it all the benefit of a long sea voyage, which, as is well known, adds suavity to any ardent liquor. When he got out the flivver to go for the mail he would place the keg in the back, thus over a rutty road aging the stuff even more rapidly with the realistic effect of a storm at sea.

Surely the general had led an ideal life. He had his

stovepipe hat and Prince Albert coat for gala occasions at Branlock when he made the address of the day; he had his letters to write to the papers, and he often had the cow hands to address in the evening at the ranch. The cow hands called him "Old Jinglebob"—not to his face or in Ben's actual presence. Still, they had to sit up when he discoursed about world affairs.

Things were always being done in Washington that the general had long been afraid would be done; they were always making mistakes down there that a detached observer, eight miles west of Branlock, could have saved them and the country from. The general probably didn't care much for more clothes than he could wear at one time, but the papers would surely pay more attention now to his letters of advice and, moreover, he had dropped a hint that afternoon that he might take from Ben's shoulders the burden of administering a fortune; he had spoken of doing some big things in a big way. That was all right with Ben, so long as the general's wider operations didn't cut into the cattle business. He had never been stingy with advice about how to run a cow outfit, but on this point Ben had shown a certain lack of plasticity, probably from having been so long in a rut.

Ben believed the general to be right about Nicaragua and the Peace Pact and Muscle Shoals and the income tax. He was far enough from these problems to take an unbiased view; but he was, it seemed to Ben, a trifle too close to the cattle business. Addie and the girls, of course, were having a spree; going places and buying things they had dreamed about, or having Hercule, the monster of a butterfly, buy them at half-

price. Ben felt a little guilty about the way Hercule was taking advantage of his friends for stuff the Carcrosses had money to pay in full for.

As for himself, the money had brought an operation, and he could smoke the kind of cigars every day that he used to smoke on Sundays; but, on the whole, he sneakingly wished the money might have happened to some other family. It was like that time he had driven out to the ranch with a yearling calf in the truck and the calf had licked the back of his neck for eight miles, nearly sending him into the ditch every time he felt the hot tongue under an ear. It wasn't downright painful, yet he had greatly wanted it to be over.

Addie and the girls had made little laughing speeches, watching him sidewise meanwhile, about a city home in the East. Well, if they wanted to be go-Easters, that was all right with him. Denver or Kansas City wouldn't be so bad for an eastern home; not too far from the high country. Of course, he wouldn't live there much himself; he'd be back on the Lone Tree raising period whitefaces. He was a saddle-warped old hellion, and that Lone Tree place had a tail holt on him with a down-hill pull. One phrase he had been hearing a lot: Be yourself! Well, he'd be himself: braid feathers in his hair, beat the war drum. But of course a man must use his judgment about letting other people know it.

While he pondered his insurgency Doyle slipped out. A moment later there was a muffled bump on his door, and he found Jackson Temple backing his chair off for a harder bump. He welcomed the interruption. Here was a man that would be himself, how great

soever any Pettigrew menace. He brought out the bourbon and more cigars.

Jackson Temple's own cigars were fierce; free burners that might at a pinch be smoked out-of-doors in a high wind. Temple always had one newly lighted when he came and, on being urged, would abandon it for one of Ben's costly cigars. He professed to like his own and said he had smoked that brand for forty years, yet he always welcomed the better cigar—acted like a poor man—and Ben wondered why. This was a mystery never to be made clear.

"How goes it?" Temple wanted to know when the exchange of cigars had been effected.

"I don't suffer quite so hard," Ben admitted. Another knock at the door, and Whitey appeared on crutches, attended by an entranced Belinda who had never seen crutches.

"Still on flat tires, but I'm moving," said Whitey, lowering himself tenderly into a chair.

"I'm going to have me a little play pair," announced Belinda. She was without her bathrobe and had run off again. She had been seized with the dizzy-ache, she explained. The last time she had run off she had said she was truly sorry—cry sorry—and would never do it again. But she had seen the crutches going by. Here the professor's chair bumped against the door, and he presently beamed upon the group.

"It's get-acquainted week," remarked the genial host. Belinda claimed the floor. She was going to have her cask off tomorrow. The old robbers still had her scooter, but if she could have crutches like Whitey she wouldn't mind. Without intermission she related that

from a window that day she had watched a man chop down a poor old dead tree. The ax went bang! a lot of times, and down came the tree.

"Axes don't go bang," Whitey pointed out. "A gun goes bang! but not an ax." Belinda said axes did, too, go bang!—but how did they go then? They all tried to tell her how an ax went, and she received widely varying and quite misleading versions.

They were relieved when Doyle came in, though Doyle was embarrassed because she clasped a rug-wrapped burden to her breast. She hadn't expected callers. She had to come in, though, and reveal her guilty secret. Belinda wanted to know if the doctor had just brought it and how much Doyle had paid for it. She also wanted to poke its eyes open, and was so set on this that she was persuaded to go back to Thelma.

With the menace of Belinda's fingers removed, Doyle lectured on the baby in terms that caused the professor to accuse her of being excessively philoprogenitive. Doyle only smiled at that, but Ben thought it was nothing to accuse a nice girl of. He supposed that was what too much education did for you. The professor went on to speak of behaviorism, and even Doyle didn't relish this. Behaviorism seemed to be something all babies were guilty of. The professor couldn't quite define it except to his own very evident satisfaction, but neither Doyle nor Ben believed for a moment that this particular baby could have any taint of it. The professor was inclined to view the infant as a commonplace demonstration in biology; he seemed to think it was any baby at all.

"But you see so many," he insisted to Doyle. "You

watch the process, life coming, life going; you see all the deadly mechanism. Here we are, this morsel of slightly organized protoplasm and we who are rather in the wane of life. Tomorrow, in a way of speaking, we shall have disintegrated and this bit of flotsam will be old in turn, hurting under the besoms that life's so handy with."

"Long-trail," Ben put in helpfully. "What's the answer?" The professor looked wise but uncertain, as if, possibly, he had just forgotten the answer.

"The earth always in labor, bringing to birth and devouring its offspring. Rather silly I dare say."

"All of it's silly," Doyle flatly told him. "The idea of saying such things with a baby like this before your very eyes. Flotsam! Protoplasm! You and your old biology!"

"Woman is ever the instinctive empiricist," remarked the unabashed professor. Ben vaguely felt that this was something to be resented in Doyle's behalf, but Jackson Temple, it seemed, thought not.

"Right you are, doctor! Hasn't it been so ever since Homer put Greece on the map? Look at what one of 'em did to Troy." None of the others seemed to care to look at this, and Doyle flounced out with her bundle.

"Well, we're all human," said Ben, feeling that someone should be apologized to.

"Life is like that," admitted the professor. Ben had noticed that this was always a safe and sometimes a helpful thing to say.

They took minute quantities of the bourbon, and the talk came back to where Ben could speak without keeping his guard up. He was presently lamenting the

days when help was down and cattle up; when you could get a riding boss for seventy-five a month and dry she stock brought sixty dollars a head. The professor said it must be ever so jolly a life. He supposed the employee called a riding boss must keep his horse on a leash practically all the time. Ben felt it would be polite to confirm this with a mere nod. The professor went on to say that he was at the beginning of a sabbatical year in which he had meant to do certain research work and he might find time for a study of actual conditions in the cattle business, which was a basic industry and about which, he suspected, he knew rather little. Ben thought sabbatical year sounded good—"Like as if every day was going to be Sunday"—and cordially offered the Lone Tree as a base from which to conduct the researches. The professor thought that would be larky.

Jackson Temple began to give them figures about the shipment of live stock into Chicago. They listened respectfully until Ben remembered a couple of bad years when it had been all he could do to putty the leaks; when you had to ride your horse tired and then eat him, which the professor considered to be the extreme of adversity, though he looked at Ben doubtfully when he disclosed this view.

Ben felt that the evening was making a new man of him; nothing to be afraid of with these people; not a one of them bothering about the mode trend, and probably they all broke crackers into their soup even if company was there. With the professor on the ranch, of course they'd probably have to veal him quick, and Whitey, who had apparently knocked down a hip,

wouldn't be any flash rider; but with people like this around him he wouldn't be afraid of an army of Pettigrews. He'd show them he could be a fence-breaker on a top-dog sporting estate. He scowled on this, which drew together the two ends of his eyebrows. He would be out there with a giant's stride quick enough.

At a break in the talk he genially told them a few things about the long-bodied Berkshire hog; also how pure-bred cattle carried their fat well distributed, while common cows got paunchy; and how sheep and cattle were kept thirty-six hours in the cars between feeds; and wound up with a good one about Ed Bantry's lawyer the time Ed was tried for selling ties to the railroad off government land and his lawyer gave him a bum suit of clothes, so he could look to the jury like a poor man, then saying his fee was five hundred dollars and leave the clothes. Neither Ed nor the lawyer ever had more than one jump on a crook. He wished Addie could hear him talking that way, all friendly and unafraid, with a bunch of good scouts. He affected a polite interest in Jackson Temple's account of some reorganization; Temple had only a growling interest in that company before, but now the crooks knew whose hand they must eat out of.

It had been a lovely evening, and Ben was sorry when his callers left. He sat with visions in which he was a prevailing figure. Addie had been a nice home-keeping woman who read library books; now she was chasing the wind. Little he cared. He'd run the other way and be running honest. Hercule and his mother were sure some brand-blotchers. They'd got Addie's and the girls' marks all burned over, so a stranger couldn't read them any longer.

Doyle came back and stood with a hand to her heart, her face alight with excitement.

"Do you know what happened?"

Ben didn't know.

"He reached for the moon!" Ben's eyes were wide, but blank.

"He actually did! Right out in this very hall. I was going along and I stopped to talk at him a minute by that open window so he could breathe some fresh air after all this smoke, and there was the full moon over us, and he opened his eyes and the moon shone in them and he reached his hands right up to grab it."

"No!" This was hard to believe.

"He actually and truly did, as plain as anything. It's the truth I'm telling you. There I stood holding him, just talking to him, and the moon was shining in his face and he gets his two hands out and reached right up for it—both of his hands, as if he could take it out of the sky."

"Well I'll be good gosh-danged!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*T*HERE followed three days of enforced seclusion for Ben; days needed not only for Hercule to pick up a few more old things through new connections this butterfly seemed to have a genius for establishing, but to convince the Pettigrews that Ben would not at once be fit for travel.

Ben himself told Addie it would be a fortnight, and when Addie and both girls had said, "What a pity!" Ben had replied, with an effort at brave lightness: "Life is like that."

He decided that the fortification of bourbon had been a tactical mistake, causing him not only to gabble but to sing. Yet, unstimulated, he would catch himself softly whistling in the midst of their talk. On the third day he suddenly became aware that Addie had been boring into him with narrowed eyes. He was at once stricken by a shooting pain, but Addie accused him:

"Ben Carcross, I'll bet a cooky you're up to some caper!"

He groaned in the throes of a fresh paroxysm, called for the thermometer and had Miss Ellis count his pulse. But he was glad to remember this was the last day he'd have to keep it up. Ben was not a born actor.

There was much talk to regale him, those three days, as they came singly or in pairs or all together. Addie had acquired a darling sweater suit of pale absinthe-green through a New York connection that Mrs. St.

John Smythe had formed, and from the same source Vannie and Gail had secured the most wonderful bargains, among them a platinum-gray ensemble with fox collar and cuffs of the same distinguished fur. Ben heard of Riviera blue and Monte Carlo yellow. He guessed that these—"dresses," he called them—would knock the eye out of Branlock.

It was now he learned of the adventure in genealogy. The Pettigrews, of course, had always possessed ancestors, but until this time, as Ben understood it, no one had ever bothered to get their names into the herd book. Now they were there, a line of Pettigrews extending back to one who had come over with William the Conqueror in 1066.

Ben was charmed, though regretful that no trace could be obtained beyond this ultimate Pettigrew. He, too, must have had ancestors, but it seemed that nothing could be done about it. Besides, nine hundred years or so of Pettigrews were a great many. Ben visioned the line receding from the general, all of them looking like him, all of them well-posted.

The general was apologetic about the outlay for this choice data, a matter of two thousand dollars in round numbers, he explained; but he felt justified because of the children. The adventurous Pettigrew of 1066 had been a Sir Rufus, and Hercule was in touch with a trusty agent who would scour England for a portrait of him. This would require, if found, a further outlay of two thousand dollars in round numbers, but a portrait of so old a member of the family might be worth it. Ben said of course it would.

"And they threw in the most adorable coat of

arms," murmured Addie. "Hand-painted with gules and lions and other things; we have it on our stationery. It's the smartest note! Would you like these same wonderful people to try again for the Carcross coat? Perhaps they came over in 1066 too."

"Well that's mighty far back in the earlies for a Carcross," said Ben doubtfully. He was thinking that even if a Carcross had come over from some place that long ago, it would take the price of a pretty fair pure-bred bull to prove it.

The St. John Smythes, it appeared, were quite ready to leave the barbaric splendor of New York for the simple and rough West. They jested with each other about the hardships.

"I rag *maman* until she becomes furious with me," boasted Hercule; "I tell her how rude the cuisine will be and how she must sleep in a wigwam. For myself I am not afraid. I have often roughed it in hunting the chamois."

Maman patted the cheek of her stormy petrel. "Bad monster that you are!" she prettily reproved him.

Ben began to wonder how you hunted chamois—if maybe you could get one with a lass' rope. Then he remembered Maria, the Branlock cook. Maria was large, with a noble and seldom-restrained torso. More than once she had refused to don corsets merely for the family. "No, ma'am, Mrs. Carcross, I wouldn't ever saddle up unless it's for company; I'd quit sooner." Would she, Ben wondered, regard the St. John Smythes as company, after the first day? But that would be Addie's grief.

While rapid talk went on he recalled a group photo-

graph of Addie and the girls taken, it seemed to him, but yesterday, when skirts swept the floor. Then they were prim, with dark hair, gently interested in art and clubs and welfare movements. Now they were canary-headed, smoked cigarettes, and he had never seen such amazing areas of skin-colored stockings. He idly wondered what had become of all the corsets, high shoes, and cotton stockings in the world. Merchants must have woke up some morning and found no sale for these. What was ever done with all the millions of them, and with the sturdy underwear ladies bought? Where would they fetch up if they kept on taking off things? Of course the law might step in.

Addie came, managing her long cigarette-holder with ladylike jauntiness, to remind him about the sports clothes and proper evening suits, and to ask what he had done in the matter of a secretary. He mumbled evasively concerning the clothes, knowing too well the neutral garb demanded of its votaries by the only sport he was mad about. Addie saw guilt in his eyes and told him she would order an outfit by measures taken from one of his good suits.

The secretary, he was admonished, must be someone who would know all the things that he, Ben, didn't, but should, know. Here he was no longer mutinous, as Addie had feared, being, indeed, so cordial as to arouse a queer alarm. He had several people in mind, he admitted. They would all make good secretaries, and he might need more than one—with all the things he didn't know. He would give no names.

"And how about Presh?" he demanded. "Don't he have to have one of those secretaries?"

Addie looked sharp at this, but Ben's eyes were boldly innocent.

"Well, he certainly needs one as much as what I do. Don't he always get fingered for his roll every time he goes to a big city?"

"Don't be too absurd!" Addie refused to consider Presh's need for a secretary.

Ben lost the thread of her urgency about his own need in a study of the silent but attentive Presh, seated near by; nut-headed, forehead going back like a porch roof; wanting to sell cars when anyone would know he couldn't sell rice in China; always girling around, with a sign on his flivver: "Chicken, this is your coop." Presh needed a secretary if ever anyone did. Ben's queer manner, as of a dog who has a bone hidden somewhere close at hand, once more jarred Addie from the patrician altitude of old Europe.

"Ben Carcross, you're being double-tongued about something. Is it about your secretary?" He looked at her with hurt eyes. "Then tell me who these people are you claim to have in mind."

He was still mulish, but finally allowed—a word at a time—"Well, I was thinking maybe of a woman secretary; you'd ought to know all these big oil men and other kinds of big ones have a smart woman secretary always—maybe a man too. I'll need a lot of help."

"A woman! Not that—" Her glance sped venomous arrows at the dusky-eyed Miss Ellis across the room. Addie had not been oblivious to Hercule's jolly banter; and had she not lately seen a powerful screen drama in which an elderly man had—how did the

screen delicately word it?—"Gone out of his home for love."

"Shucks!" jeered the suspect. "That little frisk!" But then, on a blinding inspiration, he added darkly: "You got trouble enough without borrowing any. Remember when Bill Hepburn was living with that first wife of his and went home too early on purpose one time? Well, that lady was a pretty good scout, in spite of it, and Bill had to admit so. He always said after that, 'Never look for anything you don't want to find.' "

Addie's mouth tightened beneath eyes at once secretive. Let him try something! Wouldn't she be on the ground to watch the old fool if this operation had made him queer? She tried for what she had read of as "a faintly amused smile," and made a pretense of abandoning all suspicion for a legitimate worry about help in the new house. How could they ever keep the right kind of butler!

This was a new thought to Ben. "Why couldn't Hercule be the butler after he gets all his other chores done up?"

Addie's "sh-h!" was low, but vicious. "And all these local people—the best of them too good to be servants and not good enough for anything else. Of course, it isn't as if we should be keeping open house all the time."

Ben gathered, as she went on, that the family would "winter" elsewhere. He was pleased to hear this; maybe they would spring and summer elsewhere after a while. With this possibility the future didn't look quite so murky. They could winter or whole-year it away. He

wouldn't be stingy like Bill Hepburn. He had been born feeling rich, and always felt that way, with little or much, while Bill Hepburn had been born feeling poor, and with all his money he still felt poor—one-way pockets, fondling a dollar: If he had to spend as much as thirty cents he lost all his native dignity. This was another thing Ben had so soon learned about money: being rich or being poor depended more on a person's natural feeling than how much money he had. He had always felt richer on nothing much than Bill Hepburn ever could on all his millions.

There was Addie, telling Hercule how primitive Branlock was—socially a desert—no people of the right sort there, and Hercule was endeavoring to “fancy that” as she prettily requested him to.

Ben refrained from heated contradiction; he thought that one single issue of the Advertiser would show Hercule that Branlock, socially, was some proper little cow town. Still, maybe those people weren't the right sort. From this point of view the earth seemed to be peopled with a few of the right sort, the rest being merely population. He wondered what the brands were by which the right sort spotted one another; earmarks or dewlaps or something. He knew ladies in Branlock that would set off a living-room as good as Addie.

“Hasn't he a sensitive face?” murmured Addie of Hercule. “So living, so responsive!” Hercule was mirthfully bewailing the stress he had been under; running to this place and to that; not a moment to himself.

“I should go gaga in one more day,” he assured the ladies. “*Maman* will tell you I should be in a nursing home. Yet I rack along.”

Maman called him a poor infant and fondly added that he was "*au bout de son Latin*."

"That means he is simply at the end of his Latin," Addie translated for Ben. Ben wondered how a person went gaga and why *Hercule* must use Latin, but they were now speaking of overstuffed furniture, so he puzzled about that. It sounded careless. Why should anyone overstuff furniture unless they wanted it that way; and if they wanted it that way, why talk about it?

But when he would again have asked questions Gail was talking another puzzler: "fascinating contacts." Thanks to *Hercule* and *maman*, they had made so many fascinating contacts in Europe: "And how quaint Branlock will seem now!" Branlock, the socially arid! Gail raised one of her quite pretty hands in a gesture blooming with dismay. Ben could see that she thought the old home town nothing to do a step dance about. Again he wisely refrained from speech; from informing the assemblage that he had made a lot of fascinating contacts in Branlock.

But he would be himself; break crackers into soup. Even worse: the first time they had gravy he'd sop it up from his plate with half a slice of bread, no matter who was there—that always seemed to appetite him. Maybe, back there, he could get up the nerve to blurt out to Addie that the machine wave in her hair made her look like one of those old-fashioned china dolls; and the fact that he didn't know how to behave in the presence of an artichoke would trouble him no more; they could have as many of the things as they pleased at the house in town, but the ranch itself would

be quarantined against those infernal vegetables; the seed might get out and ruin good grazing land.

In town, he now learned, there was to be a lawn—a lawn, so they could have tea on it under a marquee, which—as Ben supposed this to mean a nobleman—he found perplexing. Also Addie spoke of her day at home. Another puzzle. She had used to stay home almost every day, but apparently she meant to stay there now but one day a week. Well, that would click with him—he had picked up “click” from Vannie.

To his relief they began the stirring preliminaries of departure. He had been fearing the train might be missed, with Hercule going gaga, Gail telling about the Louvre, and Vannie in knowing speech about Maxim’s and about certain young and beautifully gowned Parisiennes who seemed to have a perfect mania for pedestrianism; and with the general relating that one who looked like a kind of a gentleman had submitted some picture cards for his inspection, which had evoked from him an indignant rebuke, whereupon “he called me a vile epithet and fled along the boulevard before I could box his ears as the scamp so richly deserved.”

Ben urgently and publicly regarded his wrist watch at rapidly shortening intervals until the ladies began to pretty themselves, pinking their cheeks and lining their lips, with eyes strained on their little mirrors. In the flurry of farewells Hercule merrily threatened to give Ben a jolly good trouncing at golf on that top-dog sporting estate, and Addie became serious with “something tells me I’m doing wrong to leave you alone here.” As he hastily reassured her they both managed rather significant side glances at the attentive Miss

Ellis—Addie because she couldn't help it and Ben with cool intention. All in an instant he had discovered that there was still one old handle to this new Addie—one he could grip. She kissed him, with another involuntary glare at his nurse, and joined the retreat.

Ben drew a free breath and waited in the restored cathedral calm until he knew no one could return for something forgotten. Then he rioted off his covering, called for his dressing gown, the new bottle of bourbon and a cigar. He might be just a run-of-the-mill man, no weighty thinker like the general, but his brain clicked after a fashion. If it became a matter of fascinating contacts, he would make a few himself. If driven hard enough, even a decent man could, in self-defense, stoop to a lot of dirty work down the gulch.

Said Miss Ellis to Doyle that night: "Let me tell you something, Pansy Gundlefinger; that blonde belle of the frozen north went off with the curse of an aching heart. I don't get what this old bird is up to, but take it from me, he's been fooling us about those pains."

"Not me," insisted Doyle.

"Well, why fool anybody? He's letting that dame think he's hugging his bed on account of little me. And did she stab me with a look? You know it! So there's my fair name all goosed up—going wild with a married millionaire—and what have I got to show for it? Me that ought to have at least a dozen 'kisses for babykins' letters and about a pint of diamonds. But not the scratch of a pen I could show in court, and not even a dollar bangle bracelet with 'dearie' on it. He did slip me a hundred as a tip the other day, but he

couldn't expect to get fresh with me on a hundred dollars. Now, is that sad opera or is it not, and what's the answer?"

Doyle shrugged. She lacked the answer.

The shrewd eyes of Miss Ellis suddenly fastened on Doyle's eyes with a novel suspicion. "Don't tell me you're the answer; don't tell me that old rip is chasing our Nell!"

Doyle shrugged again and grinned in a way Miss Ellis thought secretive.

"Well, I'll be darned! That's opera for you."

"You poor batty dear!" Doyle commiserated. "If you were half as wise as you think you are you'd be twice as wise as Solomon and Henry Ford rolled into one."

"Stand by for your station announcement!" was the snappiest retort Miss Ellis could instantly achieve.

Later that evening Ben sent for Whitey, who came with his assisting impedimenta slightly reduced—one crutch and a cane. The bandages were off his head, revealing the whole of his bleached face starred with rusty freckles.

"How's feed and water, son?"

"Coming good, sheriff."

"You going to be all right, think?"

"The doc ain't too sure. I'll be fair, if his tacks and piano wire hold."

"Maybe not flying so much?"

"Anyway, no stunting in any more gripping dramas of the sky; no more 'eagle in his pride of place,' like one of my pictures said."

"Well, what you going to do for yourself if you can't risk your fool neck any longer?"

"Gee, sheriff! I don't know yet."

"Got any ideas?"

"Well, I've been studying a lot over in the front of a magazine and something ought to be easy for me. In just a few hours you can get to be a piano-tuner or a train-dispatcher or a hypnotist or play the sax or speak French or be a banker. That's what it says, I can show you the book; 'Learn to be a banker in your spare time. Good pay, easy hours.' But I don't know; I can't fly, but I'm still up in the air."

"Listen. How'd you like to come with me? Good pay, no cracked legs, and plenty of time to read magazines."

Whitey looked doubtful. "On a ranch? What could I do, with a couple of flat wheels and probably one wing not so good?"

"Don't fret; I'll find something for you, like I just said."

Whitey seemed a bit relieved by this certainty. "That's nice of you, sheriff. I've seen plenty of ranches, in pictures, where the guy has to ride down the side of a cliff to save the girl from some other guy; but maybe there's more jobs on a sure-enough ranch than I know about."

"There's going to be on mine; running a ranch ain't just riding bad horses. I'm learning new things about it every day. Life is like that," he concluded.

"Of course, sheriff, it's up to you. I don't mind telling you it would come nice to know I'd not have to figure on a veteran's home or selling lead pencils out of my hat."

"Then we're set. I got an idea I made a fascinating contact with you."

"Hey! How's that?" demanded Whitey.

"Nothing; I mean I'm just getting wise to the mode trend."

Whitey's face was still a friendly blank. "But say, sheriff, on the level, what'll I have to be doing on this farm of yours?"

"For one thing, quit calling it a farm; you can go to work right now on that. Afterwards—let me see—" Ben deliberated, staring judicially at Whitey through the fog of smoke. "I ain't quite decided yet whether you'll be a butler or a secretary."

"Hell!" Whitey's grin was one of awkward discomfort.

"You're now on the payroll," Ben told him, and wantonly brushed ashes to the rug.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A RENEWED Ben Carcross was early up the next morning. If a certain train didn't break down, so that a pack of niggers would have to come back on him, he was going to be himself.

Doyle, with knowing eyes, watched him devour a steak. "In habit-forming quantities," she told herself; then to Ben: "Would you believe it, he smiled last night? At least I'm almost sure it was a smile. And gaining weight—you'll be perfectly astonished."

"We're going to plant him," announced Ben, guiding an expert knife around the steak bone.

"Plant him?" Doyle seemed to have forgotten about the tree.

"A seedling," he explained. "On the Lone Tree—something running about the house besides the fence."

"You wouldn't take him away from me?" she asked in quick fear.

"Who said anything about that?" he demanded, looking mysterious. "No mother and practically no father?" Doyle nodded, unequal to speech. "Lone Tree!" said Ben, still darkly important.

"They'd put him in a home," Doyle explained. "And you wouldn't think how hard it would be to get him out. I tried for three others, but they wouldn't let me."

"More than one way to skin a cat," Ben told her, becoming a dictatorial man of affairs.

"This will be a hard one to skin—even to catch," Doyle suggested.

"You often get him this far, don't you?" He glanced about the room with sinister implication. Doyle looked scared. "My great goodness! Just because I been lying on that bed so long, don't get the idea I'm helpless; don't think I got no more bones in me than a dish of that custard you been feeding me." He was boasting, but he wouldn't let this copper-top know it. Doyle was a thing of sunlight and shadow, scared yet ecstatic. "Say," he demanded, "did you ever be a secretary to anyone?" She looked blank. "Well, no matter if you did or didn't. You leave it all to me." Of course, he would have to think things out. You couldn't trust a woman.

He ventured into the corridor, found an elevator that emitted him on the ground floor, and hesitantly made his way to the hospital's impressive front entrance, where he drew a full breath of morning air before going to walk a paved footway along the grassed terrace. Wafts of flower scent came to him. From the elevation he occupied, he looked afar over a colorful sea of roofs and lordly gray walls; beyond were sharp spires and lofty towers catching the new light, but all bounded by angles. Again too many straight lines where his need was for slow bends and softened contours. From a distance at intervals came the nervous staccato of a riveting machine.

"That's one awful noisy way to make a living," he told himself.

The day before he had studied the print of one of those towered structures. It went so high it made you

afraid. It would have offices for eleven thousand people—more than twice the folks there were in all Branlock! Those eleven thousand would be a dull bunch, he thought. How could they ever get to know each other, when in Branlock alone there were people he had never even spoken to—probably dozens of them? New York looked like a permanent camp, but he wouldn't live in it and be one of eleven thousand in one building. Kind of like animals, bunched and driven, afraid to leave the herd. What he wanted now was grass and water; to see grass growing and water running. Of course, they had grass and water here, but the water was muddy and they mowed the grass. He smoked a patronizing cigar at New York.

He recalled his view from an early train entering the city; running on a trestle close to the windows of dingy houses so he could look in and see the poor things getting up; putting on their clothes and never once glancing out to watch a train go by. Miles of that—half-dressed men and women not caring who saw them. And in between buildings were pennants of wash drying from window to window; miles of drying wash, fifty, a hundred feet in the air. How did they ever get up to those clotheslines? None of this for a man that had a game of his own; a man that wouldn't be nagged so much, either, after he'd made a few more fascinating contacts.

No longer house-bound, he had meant this morning to venture forth into the town; now he thought he wouldn't. He had once read of a man shut in prison so long that when they turned him out he found he was homesick and crept back to the old jail. Might be—

here. On Lone Tree he wouldn't be homesick for any hospital; Lone Tree scratched you where you itched.

But he must make some more contacts. He walked about the grounds for a time, longing for the soft yield of earth instead of the asphalt under his feet, and debating these needful contacts. He'd have to be deep. He went back to find Miss Ellis on duty.

"New York ain't so much," he told her.

"You better not let a policeman hear you talk that way."

"That new building I saw in the paper yesterday is kind of wonderful," he admitted. "Whoever conceived that thing is a wizard. All the same I wouldn't want to live here."

"You're going to say New York is a good place to visit," returned Miss Ellis brightly.

"No, I ain't; too many people, not enough hills. I'd sooner visit Niagara Falls, which is certainly the grandest body of water on earth—moving water, I mean. Say, did you ever be a secretary to anybody?"

"I tried it a few times, but they got grouchy about my spelling. Every word had to be just so—you'd think their life depended on it."

"Well, I don't know." He looked her over. "I don't know but what I need a nurse as much as I need a secretary."

"What's on your mind?" Miss Ellis paused in her bed-making to regard him sharply.

"Well, it's like this: I might be taken down again any time and I don't want to run chances; I wouldn't feel safe unless I had someone by that knew how to work a thermometer on me. How'd you like to go West? Of course, I'd pay you a lot extra."

"Well—" She recalled the lavish tip. "Well, yes, and no. You live on a farm?"

"I do not," he told her curtly. "I live on the best little ranch you ever saw."

Miss Ellis giggled. "I never saw any ranches. What do you raise—chickens?"

"Cattle."

"Cowboys?"

"Plenty of 'em. I got about a dozen I bet are taking the rest cure on me this minute."

"Well—" Miss Ellis resumed her bed-making to hide rapid and difficult cogitation. This was a new line. The old bird wasn't trying to be funny—and yet?

Ben watched her. He didn't care what she thought so long as she made other people think. "She's a smart model for that," he assured himself.

"Think it over," he urged, "and you'd better get a few ensembles of different pretty colors; some simply adorable ones."

"What's that? Come once more." Miss Ellis abruptly halted her toil.

"I wouldn't want you should be wearing those white dresses except when I'm down with something. I'd want you to have home dresses—Monte Carlo yellow, and so on. Shop some and pack 'em in your trunk."

"I haven't any trunk."

"Get one. There —" He pointed to a packet of bills on the dresser.

"A ranch," Miss Ellis dreamily murmured. "Sports-wear with a couple of party frocks."

"All whatever!" he directed.

"You jar me; it looks like somebody's bright idea." She gave final pats to the bed and secluded herself in

the bathroom for an exciting cigarette. She had thought she knew all the good lines; all the city lines, at least. Here was something else—a ranch, cowboys, a swell sports outfit, and extra pay. This money boy looked like a big flash. Her mind ran back to photo-plays of the West. "Where men are men and women are glad of it," she murmured. The old boy was selling himself like nobody's business. "Either this is good or I'm a sap," she concluded. The latter possible infirmity had not hitherto been even remotely considered by Miss Ellis.

The only trouble was, it looked too good; a flashy production idea, but would it hold up? Probably a catch in it. Still, she knew the old boy's money wasn't trick money. Her lively mind ran to picture a rose-beige traveling suit in her fashion magazine—smart lines that would make her a scenic wallop. And a light pleated skirt with a slip-on sweater, and a fitted overnight bag and a trunk—the kind shown in advertisements, with drawers and chests and closet room, even an ironing board; everything but a kitchenette.

This was one jarring proposition—an imported novelty line, apparently all the heart throbs extracted. The old boy certainly wasn't girl-conscious. "If I just listened to him and didn't look, I'd think he was being collegiate, but I have to give him good; he means well. Still, one of us is a fish; if it ain't him, it's little me. It's simply aquarium any way you take it."

Early that afternoon Ben found Whitey at the door. "Chipper along with only one crutch, be you?" The cane had gone, and Whitey was chewing gum with a new vivacity.

"Yeah; and the doc says this one crutch can soon go into the discard."

"All right, and since you're so spry and since you're drawing pay, scout around and find that professor. Tell him to get into his car and drive here this minute. I'd like to go into conference with him."

"Aye, aye, sheriff!" Whitey hobbled briskly down the corridor, to return with the professor trying to be nimble on his own feet.

"My first day up," he told Ben. "I must be a bit cautious." The desk stoop was still there and the watchful smile—a guarding smile that would go instantly if the professor became sure you were serious. Ben found seats for the two and, keeping his own feet, began diplomatically to make another contact. Here was a genuine professor with a name like a string of Pullmans, one that would make all the Pettigrews sit up.

"It's like this, professor: Whitey and I have taken quite a fancy to you; so we says to each other, 'Why let this good scout get away from us? Why not take him out to the ranch where he can study conditions?' " Whitey looked amazed at his part in this fancied dialogue.

The professor's smile was amiable but timid. He turned to Whitey. "You know, sometimes Mr. Carcross has a twinkle in his eyes when he's being facetious, but not always. I'm rarely able to be quite certain."

Whitey talked. "He's on the level this time, professor. He told me this very morning he needed people like you and I on his farm."

"Ranch," prompted the owner patiently. "And it's

like Whitey says, so why not come along and get in fine condition again? You got this Sabbath year—"

"Sabbatical," corrected the professor.

"Whatever kind, the Lone Tree is the mode trend for it."

"He don't know if you'll be a secretary or a butler," explained Whitey.

"Ah, ha! Now you're chaffing," put in the professor. "But I might care to consider your proposal. It's awfully decent of you and I should of course wish to throw along with you as a paying guest." The term was new to both. They looked at each other inquiringly.

"Sure, we pay our guests well," said Ben uncertainly.

"He means he wants to pay his keep," explained the quicker Whitey.

"Oh!" Ben was enlightened. "No, sir; the Lone Tree never took a cent from anyone for grub or a place to sleep or a horse to ride. We ain't come down to dude-ranching yet. You'll be a perfectly natural guest."

"That's awfully decent of you, old chap." The professor smiled with understanding at last. "To be quite candid, I have often thought of junketing into your land of claw and fang."

"Claw and fang—you said it!" exclaimed Ben.

"I've really been West, you know—Cleveland—an exchange professorship. I found it interesting."

"It gets interestinger the farther you go," Ben declared.

"I dare say. And I must tell you that I have always been a great lover of scenery. Many a delightful stroll

I enjoy in Central Park. Descending one rugged defile there I sometimes fancy myself far, far from a city."

"I bet it's pretty wild," agreed Ben.

"And I shall have an opportunity for work," mused the professor.

"Plenty," Ben assured him, wondering how the professor worked; he might require tools or machinery or something. "What do you need to work with?"

The professor waved, genially modest. "Leisure only. I shall be engaged on a monograph I have for some time had in mind."

Monograph? Was that something you played records on, or maybe something with wheels that you rode? A discreet question proved it to be something you merely wrote. And he'd made his contact. He glanced about to find Ellis apparently oblivious to the talk, but he knew she wasn't. "This young lady is going with us," he explained. The others regarded Miss Ellis with quickened interest. "I'm taking her in case any of us has a relapse or something."

Miss Ellis said, "Well, yes, and no," with an effort at coy lightness, but it might be seen she was impressed. "Now," her thoughts ran, "if the old boy will take Madden and Sister Acquinata we could start a hospital that would be a class joint."

"You think of everything," applauded the professor.

"I think a lot of things people ain't expecting me to," Ben confirmed. At the moment he even wondered about Jackson Temple. Temple on his staff would be a knockout for the family. But Temple probably wouldn't join up. He had to stay here and fix that bunch of Broad Street crooks proper.

"Life is so casual," declared the professor, running long fingers through his tired hair. His blue eyes gleamed with rising speech. "We make passing and quite accidental contacts—"

"Contacts!" Ben broke in. "That's one grand word. I've made some fascinating contacts that—"

"—that result in extensive and exhilarating permanencies," resumed the professor.

"Ain't that the truth!" demanded Whitey. "If I hadn't contacted the sheriff I'd probably be out one-nighting with Indian Bitters."

"One-nighting?" queried the alert professor.

"And now," continued Whitey, "I'll probably go native when I get out there on this truck farm."

"Not a farm," Ben admonished.

"Anyway, I'll probably be raising chickens or these Belgium rabbits. There's an ad in that magazine says you can be sitting pretty in no time with one pair of these rabbits. They're fond of each other from the very start."

"Rabbits—" The professor arrested Whitey with a raised hand and regarded the two with suddenly merry eyes. "I am reminded of a bit of fun. At a certain rural French inn a pal of mine and I were served a stew of rabbit for dinner. It wasn't half bad, you know, but as we were eating, we missed our host's cat that had been a familiar of the establishment. We looked about us in mock alarm. Toby, for that was the cat's name, was nowhere to be seen, and my pal—an inveterate wag, by the way—after looking at a bit of the stew on his fork suddenly convulsed me by quoting in a grave voice. 'Toby or not Toby?'" The professor

glanced merrily from one to the other of his waiting audience. "You see—"Toby or not Toby?" In other words, 'To be or not to be?' " he helpfully added, following this with high laughter in which his audience, after a swift exchange of glances, heartily joined.

"That was certainly a hot one," Whitey applauded. "Toby or not to be?" Again they both laughed loudly.

"This pal of mine was an awfully decent chap who afterward—"

"Did they ever find out what became of the cat?" asked Ben.

"Well, to be sure—" The gleam faded from the professor's pleasant eyes. "Of course, you understand we were sitting there at table in this jolly little inn and of course if we had been dining on Toby, actually, it would have been rather horrid, but the ragout was really one such as only the French can contrive, and my pal, Basil Edgewater—quite a wag in his way—having missed Toby, looked solemnly up at me and said—"

"I like a good stew," Ben offered. "You take some onions and some—" The professor felt that all had not been well with his little narrative and feared that his manner or choice of words had perhaps obscured its undoubted values, but the talk was diverted irrecoverably to food at large. Ben's first choice was steak, and Whitey believed that a man on a desert island would think oftener of ham and eggs than anything else; yet some good words were tactfully said of stews. Thwarted in every effort to tell his story again, the professor began perforce to interest himself in his coming adventure. He would be out of the hospital imme-

diately and would at once secure an outfit of rough clothing; or perhaps he already possessed this, having done some mountain-climbing in New England.

Ben disbelieved that there were any mountains in New England, but "Anything will do," he assured his latest contact. "Any old clothes at all."

"I have an excellent pair of hobnailed boots."

"Just the thing," Ben told him.

"I understand ranching is different. I have noticed in magazine illustrations a rather distinctive attire. Should I, perhaps, be fitted to a pair of those fur pantaloons that seem to be conventional?"

"Fur pantaloons?" Ben was puzzled only for a moment. "No; we'll fit you out with hair pants and spurs and all the do-funnies. We'll have you looking woolly and hard to curry."

"Hair pants or trousers, of course I should have said." The professor accepted the correction and arose. "But remember it is only in appearance that life is so accidental, the mere flux of chance. Logically there cannot be free will, and yet we may not act even momentarily as if we did not possess it. Really, it's a stunning illusion, and the only possible working hypothesis." He beamed a cordial farewell to them, waving long ink-stained fingers.

"He livened up like I never thought he would," Ben confided to Whitey.

"Say, what was the joke he was giving us?"

"Well—" Ben considered. "Anyway it was good; you could see that. Something about this French cook making them think he'd run in a cat for dinner and telling 'em it was rabbit."

"I had some mixings over there might have been cat," said Whitey. "They hide it up with gravy, so you can't tell."

"Toby or not to be?" said Ben knowingly, and laughed at his own sally.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MISS ELLIS, watchful in the background, had not failed to remark the new vivacity of her patient. She told herself he looked like her idea of one of the Happiness Boys in their half-hour of mirth and melody—nothing less. Two cigarettes were required in the bathroom that night before she could unburden herself to Doyle.

"And one thing—he's deep. Don't let anyone tell you different."

"That deep," said Doyle, measuring to the first joint of a little finger. "He's just a boy. He wants someone to make him feel important because he thinks he isn't."

"All right, but he's lit the fuse, and the way he did it was just no way at all. Think of little me being the Sheba for one dozen of those hard-riding, straight-shooting devils that won't take no for an answer. Is that opera or is it merely cottage cheese? And say, Ginger Doyle, why don't you get a personality haircut and some skin charm and a bottle of Sheik Lure perfume and spend an hour at the Pollyanna beauty shop and be another little sunbeam on the party? Of course, I'll be radio's sweetheart—the little girl with the big voice—but you could play my accompaniments."

"You'd be surprised," said Doyle.

"As how, pray?"

"I'm going to be his secretary."

"His what? This must be static I'm hearing. He wanted me to be his secretary."

"Me too," Doyle insisted.

"Isn't that a drab? I'm terribly broad-minded—but two secretaries! And you say he ain't deep. Listen, sister, that old boy is what these golf bugs are always gabbing about: he's a mental hazard."

"I don't believe it. He needs help—I don't know why, but he does. And besides, there's something else you don't even dream about. And if I can help him fight some battle—" Doyle was alight with fervor.

"You talk like Joan of Arc—that gal the British set fire to. Well, we're both old enough not to need working permits." Miss Ellis went out, lilting a strain of "She's the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi."

"And don't ever say 'farm'; say 'ranch,'" Doyle called after her.

"I think I'll be more convincing in simple lines," Miss Ellis replied from the corridor.

After his dinner that night, Doyle's patient proved taciturn, frowning at his cigar and for a long time, one eye half closed, framing his flexible lips about words that seemed to die at the point of utterance. Doyle stepping silently, neated the room from its disarray of newspapers and cigar ash. Then, in over-nerved suspense, she sought soothing music from the radio. At first her unsteady fingers brought a conflict. One who seemed to be an aged and impoverished negro sang of a little old log cabin in the lane—"I am growing old and feeble and I cannot work no more." Both listeners were deaf to this appealing employment of the double negative, perhaps because another station was at the same time sending them the velvety-suave tones of a gentleman who greeted his friends of radio land and promised them an old English ballad "of the time

of Charles II, who was so wicked and so happy before they cut his head off."

This historic mutilation also went unnoted, but Doyle managed a farther turn of the dial and found a confidential contralto who sank huskily of her baby. Doyle knew the singer hadn't the right kind of baby in mind, but the impassioned iteration of the word itself soothed her leaping nerves. The term "baby," misapplied though it might be, at length penetrated the reek of smoke enveloping her patient. He turned about in his chair to face her.

"Now listen, we got to work this crime out."

"It isn't crime; it would be the best thing could happen to him. It's got to happen." She stood before him with hands clenched at her sides.

"All right; but we got to be practical. Now then, that front door won't do. I looked at it this morning. What's out back?"

"A drive comes up between the main building and some others."

"Then there's a back way down?"

"A small service elevator to the ground floor; then it's a step to the door; but how—"

"When you've loaded beef cattle through a chute as long as I have— The only trouble, sometimes a fool engineer will blow his whistle and raise hell with the bunch. We got to pick our time."

"Would I ever dare?"

"We'll take care of that. I want you to know I got some good people working for me."

"Wouldn't it be awful if they—I can't believe it; it can't be true."

"Truest thing you know; you do as you're told. Will you be ready to travel in three days?"

"I only need to let my aunt know."

"Don't tell her where. Get a box of candy that you write your name on a card and put in it, and send her that. And get yourself some ensembles with smart lines."

"I have everything. I only want him."

"Pinch off of that roll on the bureau and get yourself some outfits, and better get some toy animals with paint that ain't poison on."

"Oh, oh!"

"Get calm, now."

"But who'll take him down?"

"I got just the man for that task; someone a jury wouldn't convict of anything after they heard him talk a few paragraphs or tell a comical story about a cat. He could kill his own mother with an ax, and everybody would think it was a boyish prank. And, say, one thing's important."

"Oh, tell me!"

"Get calm. It's this: First thing you buy is a wedding ring. We can't have a mother on Lone Tree without one. Better go to a pawnshop for a second-hand one, so it will look used." Doyle clasped her hands and wavered away to the couch. Her knees had gone weak. "And don't forget a few bottles of milk for him." Doyle laughed at that and was a little restored.

"Get calm, now!" he again soothed her. "It's a fine impulse; we'll ride it while it's young."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MISS ELLIS had done her tasks of the morning with unthinking precision. What cerebration she was capable of concerned itself with the enlivening but misty future. Was this the beginning of the rainbow trail, leading on to a hot dancing finish, or would it be one of those Mexican stand-offs where you lost everything but your life? She was more than a little puzzled, and this had not before occurred in her short but sure life. A home in melody land—or down among the starfish where bubbles played in the glass-fronted tank? She could not know.

In the bathroom she muttered to herself, "Darned if I don't feel younger than Davy Lee! That Coogan boy seems like Trader Horn to me." But she must keep her mind on straight; the next move was up to her customer.

He made it when she returned to the room. "How long since you been out in the daytime?" he queried.

She counted. "Over five weeks, isn't it, I been on your case?"

"You need to be sunned up."

"Oh, I'm one of these tropic nightbloomers; you get a cabaret tan after a while." What was he coming to?

"Listen, then; beat it out and shop those things we talked about. Money on the bureau; deal yourself a poker hand off the top of the deck."

"You're certainly using strong language." She went

doubtfully to the dresser and picked up the packet of bills. The old nut was talking like a world-beater.

"Five of these? They're all hundreds."

"Hurry along, and it's a ranch, not a farm. . . . Hobnailed boots for mountain climbing."

"My arch simply has to be held up." She extended the arch.

"All right, all right; get something that will make you look dangerous."

She was counting off the bills. How could she safely carry five times as much money as she had ever seen?

"Look out you don't get your stocking picked," warned the man with whom money seemed to be just a pleasant mannerism. But she wrapped the bills in a handkerchief and was pinning this to the inside of her waist. She drew a long breath.

"All right, then, if you want me to be a brunette eyeful, one of the sun-kissed ones—but I know I'm going to fall out of bed in a minute."

"Yeah. Don't fool with your hair; we already got our quota of yellows."

"Hot," Miss Ellis called it. She was too dazed to think up a better one. "Act your age!" she cautioned herself as she went out. It was simple enough so far. He wanted someone with the class draw, and she was the high-spirited girl that could please a pay customer.

That afternoon Ben made, by chance, another contact. Whitey came proudly with only a cane, walking nearly human, he announced; and while they smoked there arrived Professor Abercrombie to present his sister. Ben wondered at first if she would be a lady professor; she was short, with the blue and confidently

earnest eyes of her brother—to be observed through nose glasses, where his shone through spectacles—she was rounded where the brother was ill-fleshed, and had kept more of her hair, Ben noticed; and she was trimly right in dress where her brother was careless. Her cushiony small hand gripped Ben's.

"I so much wanted to meet Johnny's new friend," she began, "so I begged him to fetch me. I'm sure you won't mind, and do go on with your smoking; I love the smell of a good cigar. Johnny's pipe reeks." She seated herself after a rapid survey of the room. "They're such neat housekeepers they almost make you forget what the place is."

"Not so homelike," Ben submitted. "Here you can't hardly lie down without going to bed."

"But you are both released after this ordeal. How providential! Johnny had felt his operation coming on for months, practically. And now how wonderful that he'll go to that delightful country place of yours!"

"Ranch," said Ben distinctly.

"To be sure. And I know it will bring the roses back to his cheeks, poor boy!"

"Leisure for my work," said the professor.

"Is your weather often inclement?" the sister asked.

"It certainly often is," Ben assured her. "I guess we got about the pick of the world's climates."

"Oh, I see!" said Miss Abercrombie. "Then I shall try not to worry, because the care of him is simple enough. For his breakfast only fruit juice and a tiny helping of one of the lighter cereals. The poor boy wishes to eat so many things that are ill advised—meat especially."

"You mean steak?" asked Ben, feeling hostile.

"Steak and other indigestibles. I've known him to eat a chop when we were both certain he would react painfully."

The professor here took the talk from his sister: "I was telling them only yesterday of that droll occurrence at the little Normandy inn. You recall it, Agatha?"

"Not quite nice in its implications," said Agatha.

"Droll, though." He regarded Ben and Whitey with the reminiscent gleam. "There were we at table, you recall, with Toby missing from the scene he had always graced, and good old Basil, after glancing about the room in mock alarm, caught my eye with the most laughable grimace and began to intone—quite loudly you understand—"

Ben and Whitey burst into laughter apparently uncontrollable. Miss Abercrombie was pleased by the tribute to her brother's gift as a *raconteur*, yet still disapproving of what she had called the implications. "So suggestive, so appallingly unappetizing!" she declared. Her brother was again left with his persisting belief that his audience had got less than the story's full flavor.

Miss Abercrombie bade them adieu after taking the address Ben gave her. It seemed an unpromising spot, but she was assured that mail was carefully handled even that far west. Ben had by this time allotted her a tentative place on his strategic map. The professor, after escorting her below, returned to inform them that his sister was a dietetic as well as a moral perfectionist. He confessed to a secret liking for meat,

especially a steak, and Ben told him where he would have it aplenty.

"I shall eat, away from Agatha, whatever my system seems to crave; am I right or wrong?"

"Of course you are!" Whitey told him.

"That sister of yours seems to be a good sport," suggested Ben.

"Oh, but I assure you she's an awfully decent sort."

"I may ask a little service of her before I leave."

"She'll be only too glad," responded the professor. "And she's so genuinely pleased with my plan of going back to the land." He arose, and Whitey, feeling that the hour had not been too full, sought to enrich it by a question or two culled from the last book the professor had lent him. Obliging then, the professor laid bare for them the structure of the atom.

"I can always start him," Whitey explained when the door had closed. "I like to see him going round and round in his squirrel cage."

"There ain't any of us perfect," Ben mildly reminded him.

Late that afternoon a wearied but ecstatic Miss Ellis stole into the twilight shadows of the room where Ben sat alone. She dropped to the couch and looked upon him with fevered eyes.

"Well, young lady, did you shop yourself one of those platinum yellows?"

"I've had an all-day binge; just like that. I hardly know where I am."

Thus far she found it a perfect dream. The money had worked. She had proved that all those bills were good, at least all but—she opened her hand-bag and

fumbled among its contents—all but a dollar and thirty-eight cents of the money had been good beyond question.

“What did you hold all that out for?” asked Ben.

Miss Ellis smiled wanly. “You know, when you gave me those bills it was like one time in public school, just before Christmas. A man came into our room with a sack of candy for our Christmas tree. I mean a big sack—mammoth! It stood about as high as I did. Us kids couldn’t hardly believe it. We hadn’t thought there was that much candy in the world—I mean all in one place. Well, I got the same kind of a boot out of those bills, and I know I’ll soon hear an alarm clock. But there won’t be a squawk from me when I wake up and find I haven’t a dime to scratch my ear with. Only I hope I can remember some of those bargains I got.” Excitedly she fumbled in the bag again and brought out a sheaf of folders, illustrated, Ben could see, with slender ladies clad in bargains. “A fashion classic,” she murmurously crooned. “‘An authentically styled selection of sports apparel.’ ‘Something for the smart world’s gayer evenings.’” She stared at the pictured ladies. “‘For the smart world’s gayer evenings,’” she echoed with a tired relish.

“That’s the stuff,” Ben encouraged.

“I want you to remember one thing, Mr. Carcross. You’ll always spot first with me,” she solemnly told him. “I don’t care what happens,” she desperately added.

“It’s liable to,” Ben warned her. But she was back with her folders. “I wish you could see that trunk—seven rooms and a bath. I never did have a trunk be-

fore. And the fitted bag, 'styled for smartness.'" When Doyle came, Miss Ellis greeted her fellow worker with something of the old lightness.

"A three-letter word meaning very, very warm," she announced, and was diverted from a recital of the day's adventures only when Doyle in the bathroom fumbled in her own bag.

"You don't know the most, even yet." Doyle slowly withdrew a plain gold band, which she fitted to a finger of her left hand.

Miss Ellis froze to attention. "For the love of heaven, a wedding ring!" Doyle waved the hand so that the embellished finger might be observed from many angles. "Well, I'll be— Ginger Doyle! What is this? Just a girlish escapade?"

"And still you don't know the most," Doyle boasted.

Miss Ellis swayed on her feet in pretense of being stunned from a blow. "You'll simply have to dial another station." Doyle preened her newly adorned hand.

"I know," declared Miss Ellis brightly. "You got that ring and you'll get a conservative tailored ensemble and go down to Atlantic City and enter the beauty contest as Mrs. New England."

"I have a few ensembles myself," Doyle confessed.

"Be good. Spill the rest of it."

But Doyle tightened her mouth. She would confess only that she was going to the party.

"Well"—Miss Ellis shrugged—"nobody ever heard me say you're not a wise apple."

"I'll spill it all after you've seen him," Doyle promised.

"Some college-boy blond?"

"A million times that."

"Gee! And me all the time thinking you'd never learned to say no because you'd never had to."

"You'll be surprised!"

"I'm shock-proof. I've surprised myself up to the limit. Now I'm going home and open four thousand boxes of what milady will wear and pack it in a trunk that would stand out on any station platform in the world—got my red initials on it too. I've pinched one arm black and blue and still I'm slumbering on like a little gipsy sweetheart."

Doyle went out to her employer, hesitant, timid, yet determined. "I got it!" The words came with a conspiratorial huskiness. She revealed the finger with its mendacious circlet.

"Looks new," Ben objected.

"It is." She slipped off the ring. "I went to one of those places like you told me, but it was so—so—I was afraid the man would suspect something. He was awfully suspicious-looking; a fat old man with bad little eyes and little black dog whiskers crawling all over his face like this." Doyle's quick fingers crawled informingly from her eyes down both cheeks to meet beneath her chin. "He took out a shabby little box and there were a lot of old wedding rings. Some of them worn almost through. He was going to melt them up. 'So you find yourself needing one of these?' he says to me—kind of owlish-smarty and looking me all over in the sharpest way—and I just couldn't take one.

"I kept thinking that mean little box was full of sad women and the rings were all crying and moan-

ing; really I couldn't stand there and listen to it. When he put his fat old hand in and drew out three or four, I knew I'd never have a moment's peace in one of those rings. Think of all the wives that must have loved their husbands and been so hopeful about it—and there their rings were! I said to him, 'That box is haunted,' looking him right in the eye, and I walked out on him while he stood there smirking at me. Then I went to a nice place, and the clerk was very pleasant and I got this one and I'll rub it and scour it—age it—and don't you think it may do? I just couldn't have worn one of those others—I couldn't—I couldn't!"

"Get calm!" Ben patted her quivering shoulder. "Of course, it's all right. Lots of married ladies get fancy new rings when the old ones are dingy—outmoded." He thought maybe he'd switch this for Addie's old one. "Now take it easy. Where's your nerve? You let yourself be rattled and you may have to stow that ring away in your hope chest."

"I'll be cool as ice when the time comes," she protested. "But that box with all those crying, sad rings—"

"All right, all right! Go pour yourself a drink." She gestured a refusal, but sat down and unclenched her hands.

It was heady business, Ben decided; but he'd been excited, too, he remembered, when he dug his seedling up to plant on Lone Tree. Later in the evening he sent for Jackson Temple, who came with a freshly lighted cigar of his own which he gracefully consented to exchange after the usual formal protest.

"It's like this," Ben explained. "That chauffeur I

see hanging around you ain't had much driving to do lately, has he?"

"Nothing to do but grow hog-fat," Temple answered. "Can you use him?"

"Well, I notioned I can; about three nights from now—say at midnight."

Doyle fled from the room, unable to bear this.

"Midnight?" Temple turned the cigar about between cherishing lips and narrowed his eyes at Ben. The pale lids seeming to shrivel. "Midnight—check! Any night you say. Give me word in the afternoon, and Joe will be at your orders."

"I won't want him but just for a short ride." Ben meditatively revolved his own cigar between his lips, tilted back his head and blew a series of perfect smoke rings aloft. "You see, there's an awfully decent chap I know that it's his birthday and I'm putting up a little surprise on him."

"Make the car your own," Temple urged, erasing the wrinkles from about his eyes. He then summarized that day's market for his host, pointing out that certain parties had considered his being in a hospital would make him easy; thought it a good time to put a crimp in him. They had, Ben was assured, a surprise in store, but there would be no birthday party, no cake, no candles—just a bunch of bad news. Mr. Temple had the Broad Street bunch grilling splendidly—learning how to take a joke—when he was stalked and sequestered by an imperious menial.

Ben next sent for the professor, who came with a fountain-pen that had inked his fingers. "I am making up my list of little necessities," he explained.

"So am I," said Ben. "When you leaving this hut?"

"This hut?" echoed the professor laughing guardedly. "My surgeon promises I shall go not later than day after tomorrow."

"When you go I wish you'd go about twelve P.M. midnight and take a package for me."

"Of course, my dear Carcross—only too glad. And take the package where?"

"Only to your sister, who will keep it a short time. I'd like to have her come here for you."

"She'll be delighted."

"In a car I'll send for her—a car that will drive up to the back entrance. You give her the package, and both of you take it to your house and look after it till the next morning. That sister of yours is a sensible lady."

"She's quite all of that."

"It's kind of peculiar— You see, there's an awfully decent chap that it's his birthday and I'm putting up a kind of a surprise on him."

"One of those jolly frolics, eh?"

"Some would call it that—wear soft-soled shoes."

"Tennis shoes; it sounds actually surreptitious."

"That's the word I was trying to think of," Ben confessed. "I'll give you further directions later."

"You've only to make them plain, my dear chap." He referred to his note-book. "I have put down a supply of dry chocolate."

"Fine," said Ben. "But have all those things off your mind by the night I need you. I'm getting your transportation west."

"Thanks a lot! I don't mind telling you I've always

loathed having to purchase railway tickets. There are always so many persons going to so many destinations. I never can quite believe they're booking me for mine."

"Soft shoes and a long coat."

"I have both."

"And a hat that pulls down over your face. Better take one I have."

"Melodrama, what?"

"Mellow enough," Ben admitted.

Doyle slunk from the bathroom when the professor had gone. "I listened; I couldn't help it." She held up the gray wool rug, furling and unfurling it. "When I began this I knew it would be for a baby, but I didn't knit into it any hope it would be for—you know—him! And now—" She held the rug to her breast, wide-eyed and tight-mouthed.

Ben regarded her genially. "I expect you better go down to that diet kitchen and see if you can't hot something up for yourself—a cup of tea."

"If I could only go to sleep and stay so until he's planted on that lovely farm of yours."

Ben stared at her with a mounting choler, but she was so defenseless. "Yeah, it's a lovely farm," he wearily agreed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CAME the night and, at long last, the hour and the chap that it was his birthday. Four months to the hour, Doyle had computed.

Ben issued final instructions to Whitey: "You're to be a kind of a tackle, like in this football; block any interference—see what I mean? No strong-arm work; still, use your judgment. You might go out of your head and get rough if necessary—be delirious."

Whitey nodded. "I get you, sheriff."

When he had gone, Doyle quit sewing on what she had read of as a tiny garment, and with a large leisurely carelessness said she believed she would take a little prowl.

"Good luck!" Ben wished her, and with an elaborate carelessness of his own lighted a fresh cigar and affected an interest in one of the sports-apparel folders. "The correctly dressed man is always at ease," he read. He didn't believe it. Wasn't he now correctly dressed? He wondered how many more odd angles there might be to the old cattle business.

On the floor above, a door silently opened, and Doyle appeared, clasping a burden shrouded in a gray wool rug. Ten quick steps down the corridor she transferred this to a casually sauntering man who trod the tiles in tennis shoes and whose tall figure was enveloped in a violently patterned ulster. His face was all but hidden by the drooping of a black hat originally pur-

chased by one whom the present wearer at that moment would have inadequately described as a gentleman farmer.

Miss Doyle turned back and, opening a door beside the one that had lately given her egress, might have been heard to exclaim, "Hello, girls!"

The tall gentleman meanwhile continued a noiseless progress, no longer at a sauntering pace, to a service elevator, the door of which opened as if by magic to receive him. It had really been opened by a shorter and undisguised man, conspicuously freckled, even in the half light, who at once said from one corner of his compressed mouth: "Don't carry that thing under your arm like a bundle! Do you want to start something?"

The burden-bearer, as the elevator descended, shifted his bundle to another position. Both issued on the hospital's lowest floor, and the tall man stalked rapidly toward a double door at the end of the passage. He was followed more slowly by his lift attendant, who himself now sauntered in a manner that would have been considered aimless by an observer. One such, a comely young woman in the uniform of a student nurse, appearing suddenly from a side passage, paused to survey the laden figure in retreat; yet she was enabled to secure only the briefest glimpse of him because she was heartily accosted by the sauntering stranger:

"Well, look who's come to the party! If I didn't know better I'd say it was Gloria Swanson making a personal appearance."

The student nurse was far from displeased by these blunt words, although she prettily protested that she did not look one bit like the screen star named.

During the consequent reaffirmations and winsome denials the gentleman who so pleasingly diverted her beheld, looking over her shoulder, the tall man gain his exit and enter a lordly motorcar seemingly in wait for him. He heard a door slam and perceived the car to move off. He then begged the student nurse to show him where his ward was, asserting that he had lost his way in a confusion of alleys. This she consented to do, and was so perversely fluffed en route that the fleeting vision of a muffled tall stranger carrying something gray was wholly and forever wiped from her young mind.

Back at a table in the supply room of the nursery, Doyle engaged in badinage with the head nurse and her three aides. After a time of this she remarked that she must return to her case, but would first have a peek at her favorite baby. The nurse and the aides chaffed her about this weakness for babies not her own.

Doyle took their banter gracefully, and then, her hand against the baize-covered door, she casually said, "By the way, I see you lost one of your babies tonight."

"When?" asked the nurse, with but moderate curiosity. They were always losing babies to desirous mothers.

"Why, just now."

"Just now?" echoed the nurse and her aides in concert. This was different.

"Certainly just now. As I came along the hall I passed a man carrying one—some father, I suppose."

"Just now?" again queried the head nurse, while her trainers looked bewildered.

"But we haven't let—" The head nurse pushed past

Doyle, and the nursery seemed to explode with light. The trainers advanced while Doyle paused in the doorway. The quick eye of the nurse caught the vacant basket.

"Why—why—" Her dazed eyes searched the room; she stooped to look under the suspended baskets. The trainers stooped.

"Why, this is—" But the nurse was stricken speechless. The trainers regarded her and one another with scared eyes. "You said just now?" demanded the nurse.

"Just now, when I came along the hall. And it's that favorite baby of mine—that lovely one."

"Now, listen," commanded the nurse. "You say you saw a man taking a baby away. What did he look like?"

"Young, good-looking fellow; black eyes and dark wavy hair parted on the side; kind of a scar on his right cheek."

"Why—" said the nurse and trainers again in concert. "But—" they began once more.

"It's him," declared the nurse.

"It's him!" echoed the trainers.

"Who?" asked Doyle.

"That snipe of a father," explained the nurse. "The one she kept the photograph of inside her nightdress all the time. It's down in the office now with that letter he wrote when he ran off. Gussie, go down and ask Sister Ambrosia to let you have that snapshot."

Gussie went. Five minutes later Doyle scanned the likeness while the four scanned her face. "The very man I saw," she told them. "There's the scar on his cheek and that wave in his hair—I could see that because his cap was pushed back."

"Gee gosh!" said the nurse. The dismayed trainers silently shaped their lips to the same oath.

"Wouldn't that blister you?" The trainers looked this.

"Sister Ambrosia's coming up," gasped the still-panting Gussie.

"I really must get back," said Doyle, "but you can tell sister I described the man."

In the room below Whitey had reported to Ben. "Everything went bingo-bang, sheriff. The prof looked awful tall in that coat; you'd of said he was a guy walking on stilts. But smack out of the door he went with the bambino and into the pompous big car. There was a peach of a little girl on that lower floor—one of these studying to be a nurse—and she got a quick flash at him; but I was there with a jolly. I bet she don't remember did she see a man with a kid or didn't she."

Ben was in bed and at unfeigned ease when Doyle came back.

"I was cold as ice—didn't I tell you? And everything went right. I stuck around, made them miss him, then identified that father from his photograph. They forgot I'd seen it before. They were a fussed bunch. Serves them right—leaving that room so anyone could sneak in there and simply steal a baby!" Her indignation seemed a little odd to Ben.

"That's the way you wanted things, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but I mean they ought to be more careful after this."

"Will they start anything?"

"No, they won't want anything started. Besides, it

was his own baby. They think he took it that way, so he wouldn't have to pay the bill."

"Find out how much the bill is, and we'll send some money in a note telling what it's for—enough more to make 'em think the cuss guessed at it."

"I'll do it tomorrow." She was pacing the room, free at last to let down from the tension in which she had been rigid. "You don't know how terribly I hate to lie, even when it's necessary," she said once; and again: "I wish he could have been twins."

"Then the professor would have had to be twins," Ben suggested, but she ignored this.

A moment later: "We must look out for his tonsils and adenoids."

"Can he use my razor, just at first?" Ben asked.

Again Doyle was deaf. "I simply must telephone those people. I can't wait one more minute."

"Just so I get a little sleep," Ben answered. She was gone, and he dozed almost at once. He was aroused by a hand clenching on his shoulder.

"It's all right. He's so good—not a whimper—and having his bottle this minute. But that woman!" Her tone was heavy with scorn. "Do you know what she said over the phone? You won't believe it. She said, 'He seems to be quite a nice baby,' just like that." Doyle repeated the phrase in a tone meant to be offensively supercilious. "And 'seems to be,'" she added with venom.

"Just so I get a little sleep," Ben pleaded.

Doyle sighed and gave in. What could you expect of a man? The very best of them were utterly selfish in matters of their physical comfort.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE next afternoon Whitey, with a soft pencil, wrote the note Ben dictated. "That brick-top would have made a dandy burglar," he remarked.

Ben placed a bill in the envelope Whitey had addressed to the hospital.

"Darned if it don't seem like turning your back on the old home," he said. He took a final survey of the room and bath, retrieving from the latter his tooth-brush and from the disordered bed an old issue of the *Branlock Advertiser*.

"All the same, sheriff, I ain't going to break down on leaving."

On the way to the station Ben had their driver mail the letter. As the cab went on Whitey remarked, "Babies! Some want 'em, some don't—that's the funny way it goes."

"This is a wonder baby," Ben told him. "He'd have been snapped up." Whitey wasn't so sure of this, but he was polite.

They made a slow way through a noisome welter of traffic. "All these people going to perish from gas some day," Ben declared. "I wouldn't live where you can't breathe right."

"Yes, New York's coming on," said Whitey.

"I'll stake you to my interest in the camp."

In the station waiting-room, tumultuous with a weaving throng, "Every last one of 'em locoed," Ben

remarked. They spied the professor. He towered from a girdling island of bags, his capped head seeming to revolve as he scanned the crowd.

"Looks like one of these lighthouses that go on and off," observed Whitey. The light halted to illumine them with extra rays.

"Oh, there you are! I was beginning to worry. It's only twenty minutes till leaving time."

"Get calm," Ben advised. "You can do a lot in twenty minutes."

"I gave my two heavy bags to one of these uniformed urchins. He seemed to know where to place them after one glimpse of my ticket; yet I dare say—"

"Slow down," Ben soothed him. "And you might as well get the rest of your plunder aboard." He snapped fingers at a passing redcap, and the professor trustingly fell into line. As they paused at the gate they were joined by Miss Ellis and a pleased red-cap who jauntily carried an impressive new bag. With the exception of an epochal journey some years before to Poughkeepsie, Miss Ellis had not hitherto shed the light of her presence beyond the confines of Greater New York; yet she joined them with the air of one long wearied by world travel; she was languid.

"That young woman really has remarkable eyes," observed the professor.

"She's entirely remarkable," Ben told him.

Miss Ellis greeted them casually, her remarkable eyes concealing the circumstance that inwardly she was seething. She had schooled herself on the journey to the station. It had occurred to her for the first time that, if people from the country seemed like hicks in

New York, so might people from New York seem like hicks after they crossed its borders. She did not wish to seem like a hick, either at home or abroad.

"Should we wait for Miss Doyle?" she now thoughtfully asked. "She's not a bit accustomed to travel."

"Trust her," Ben answered. "She was in the car one minute after that gate opened."

They were led to the car. Ben had taken for himself a mere berth where you could see your neighbors, but there were two drawing-rooms for the others, and while Whitey and the professor stowed their bags in one, Miss Ellis tried the door of the other. Finding it locked, she rapped, and the door opened, at first wide enough to reveal a narrow sector of Doyle's scared face; then wider for the admission of her friend; after which it was sharply closed and relocked.

"Why the mystery play?" demanded the newcomer.

"Sh-h!" whispered Doyle.

"All right, but why?"

"Wait," whispered Doyle, a finger on her lips. Miss Ellis, now impressed, rather weakly stepped across to a seat, carelessly pushing at the end of a gray rug. She was ready to slump.

Doyle stifled a scream. "Look out! Not there!"

Miss Ellis now found herself on the edge of a candid irritation. She'd had enough for days to make her a bundle of nerves. "What in the devil is the— For the Lord's sake!"

Doyle had pulled back a fold of the gray bundle to reveal the face of a sleeping infant.

"And whose brat is that, may I ask?"

"Brat!" Doyle flamed at her. "It's him! Mine!"

Miss Ellis retained control of her jangled nerves only with an effort. "Yours, eh? Just another girlish escapade, I suppose?" Her eyes suddenly froze to Doyle's left hand. "And that ring finger of yours as naked as the day you were born!"

"Oh, I forgot," huskily whispered Doyle, reaching for her bag. Miss Ellis slumped to the vacant seat, staring wildly at Doyle and the bundle. For too many days her mental control had been overtaxed. Now she gulped, her face crumpled and large tears gathered in her remarkable eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned!" She could manage this between gulps, while reaching for her bag. Doyle gave her a handkerchief.

"Now look what you've gone and made me do!" The handkerchief came away from her streaming eyes with more color than tears have.

Doyle herself began to weaken. She, too, had endured past the breaking point; she sniffled perilously, reached for the bundle and, above it, wept without restraint.

"That's right!" the other cheered her, through sobs by this time better regulated. Strange events had worked up to what she would have called a big emotional finish. "We got those baby blues," she added. They wept companionably as the train moved off.

Outside, Ben relaxed in his section. Already the oppression that, with him, had been New York was lightening. When the train ran close by those miles of dingy apartment houses he was no longer alert to the revelations of domestic intimacy. Loosely clad women and dejected men stared from their prisons unnoted.

His set gaze pierced those angular drab surfaces, and he beheld another scene—curves and color, soft blendings of green; deep greens that would lighten, with here and there a sharper note where wild mustard was springing. He heard the plaintive cry of kildees racing along the road to rise and breast the wind as he drove among them. Fat cattle stopped grazing to regard him. He caught the spicy scent of sage-brush baking under an ardent sun. Far off a rugged mountain showed mel-low through a haze, snow still abundant on its upper reaches; snow to melt through the summer and keep his ditches full. Grass was growing, water running.

He counted the days. He had sent a misleading telegram to the family, wishing no reception at Branlock. He would reach there a day before the time his telegram named. A confidential letter to Art Dugdale had taken care of the discrepancy. He wondered how the new bulls were doing—if they'd turned out to be just a bunch of fence-breakers. He was recalled to his surroundings by the professor stooping benevolently to proffer a chocolate bar.

This brought his protective staff of assistants to mind, and he went to the stateroom of the nurses. He found them red-eyed but composed. Doyle's fear of a snooping policeman was now a little allayed. She was still conscious, Ben noted, of the gleaming ring. He persuaded both of them to go to the observation platform for a breath of air, although Doyle left with reluctance.

He was alone with the baby, which lay sprawled on the seat, wedged in by a pillow, and surveyed the bending face in a way that curiously embarrassed Ben.

The baby's gaze was calm, without prejudice, yet critical. Ben tried to shrug off the embarrassment.

"Was he—was he—was he!" he remarked huskily, and extended a finger which the baby seized. That nurse back in the hospital had said all babies did this, but Ben didn't believe it. This baby knew what he was doing. He kicked violently beneath the blanket, flung his head from side to side and made a gurgling sound of apparent gratification, contorting his face in what the observer considered near enough a smile to call it that. The grip on the finger tightened at an effort to withdraw it.

"Am I a fool?" Ben demanded. The baby achieved a sound remarkable but not informing.

"Wuzzy, wuzzy, wuzzy!" Ben again remarked, glancing at the door. It was all right, here alone, but he wouldn't want to be caught at this.

Doyle found him so. She had ventured no long absence.

"Wouldn't it be terrible if there was an accident—one of those head-on collisions? I don't see why they can't run at a sensible speed."

"Bill ain't worrying about that—or anything else," Ben answered.

"Bill? Not Bill!"

"What are you going to name him then? Come on, what's his name?"

"I haven't had time. I can't do everything at once." She came to release Ben's finger and stood up to face him at the door. "You've made me the happiest woman in all the world."

"Shucks!" muttered Ben, and left quickly.

Miss Ellis returned in excellent spirits. "I like riding on the steam cars," she said. "And what do you think?" Doyle didn't know, so Miss Ellis related that an affable gentleman on the observation platform had suspected her of returning to Hollywood, and she had seen no good reason for undeceiving him. "Then he wanted me to step into his parlor and have a little drink, but I said my contract didn't allow it. Of course it might have been all right, but I don't think you can tell on these fast trains."

"You better be careful," Doyle advised.

"When did you know me that I wasn't?" retorted the other, and extended a finger to the baby. This was instantly gripped.

"Why, he knows me already."

"All babies grab fingers," Doyle explained. "It doesn't mean a thing except an object to take hold of."

"Well, he looks as if he knew me, don't you, Sugar? Sugar, Sugar, Sugar!" she added.

"I think he would know me if he knew anybody," said Doyle sharply, and objected when the other wished to hold him.

"You act like he was your own baby," said Miss Ellis.

"I'm going to do just that!"

What might have been a squabble was interrupted by the professor. "And how is our monad?" he beamingly asked.

"Monad?" Doyle didn't care for the term.

"An ultimate unit," explained the professor in mollifying tones. "A minute, simple organism representing the universe—yet man, the paragon of animals."

"Oh!" Doyle grudgingly accepted this.

The professor extended an investigative finger, with the wonted result, but did not misinterpret this. "An instinct that universally conditions humanity," he explained, "and how absorbing you will find it to watch presently the liberation of the hands from any part in the locomotor function."

"Sugar, Sugar, Sugar!" sang Miss Ellis.

"And is your need satisfied?" The professor shrewdly regarded Doyle.

"Oh, yes; it is, it is!"

"Very interesting, very instructive," he returned.

"He's not so dumb as you might think," said Miss Ellis, when the professor had gone.

"Too scientific for any use," Doyle insisted. "Talking like a factory superintendent—he makes me tired."

Outside, the professor was explaining to Ben: "A most interesting demonstration; that woman had reached a point where she could no longer tolerate the repression of her emotional responses. Now she has the ideal outlet."

"Yeah, I thought it was that," Ben agreed. "Of course, I wasn't sure."

The professor passed on, and Ben watched a very old lady across the aisle, her thin, veined hands folded in her lap, her head a little bent, nodding to the rhythm of the train, her withered face relaxed, her eyes far fixed. She was listening, he thought; hearing all those back years of life. "Long-trail," he told himself. And she would now be close to the end, but had never complained; he was sure of that. There was a dim little smile of acceptance on the old face. Life

was queer, at least to a cowman whose own mane was bleached.

In his berth that night he raised the curtain and watched the world go by. Little lighted towns they ran through were like other worlds; peopled same as this, but remote, sufficient to themselves; uninterested in his world. He began to puzzle over life and fell asleep at it with a late moon blanching his weathered face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE caravan bearing the Carcross entourage sped on to the West, the members of the entourage being variously instructed and frequently entertained. Its principal spent much of his time on the observation platform, seeming to breathe deeper and oftener as the undesired East retreated from beneath his carriage.

"The sheriff's getting fire in his eye," Whitey told Miss Ellis on a later day as they sat in the dining car.

Miss Ellis said that Mr. Carcross was an old dear and then, having long looked out of the window, refreshed her companion with a comment. This keen young observer had supposed that the vast bulk of her fellow citizens were massed in New York and its environs. Yet she had been swiftly leaving New York for hours and hours and still they persisted. She had not been unduly astonished by the indications of congested urban life in Chicago, but they were far beyond Chicago.

She turned from the window and weightily announced, "No matter how far you go, there's always people."

Whitey choked, wiped coffee from his face and tears from his suddenly dimmed eyes. The professor joined them and, at Whitey's request, Miss Ellis repeated her wondering comment.

"But, my dear young lady, of course there are always people—towns and cities," the professor helpfully told

her. About to discourse on the distribution of human beings, he was diverted by a freight car passed on a siding. Windows had been cut into its dull red sides, curtains hung at these, and before them were boxes filled with flowering plants. The professor remarked that nothing would please him more than to go a-gipsying in one of these quaint homes. "So domestic, yet with such a drolly sophisticated air of travel!" He added that one of the chief causes of modern unrest was a craving for meaningless luxury.

The existence of modern unrest was news to Miss Ellis. She had slept comfortably and insisted that a Pullman would be a lot more restful than any old freight car, no matter if it did have curtained windows and geraniums. The professor began patiently to explain his subtler meaning, but Whitey left in haste to tell Ben all about it.

He found him leading the little old lady from across the aisle to Doyle's drawing-room and followed to observe her as the baby was discovered. She gave a little gasp of delight and promptly seized the infant to cuddle it. The two seemed to recognize each other across a void of years. They both gurgled, and the baby's feet waved madly. Ben watched them narrowly. Out in the car the old lady had been withdrawn from the world, a tiny shrunken figure in black silk, lace at her throat held by a cameo brooch on which a weeping willow sheltered a drooping female; on her face the half smile of uncomplaining acceptance. Now the ancient lines had softened and fresh life was there.

"Darned if she don't look like a girl again," Ben told himself.

"Is he yours?" asked the old lady. Ben hesitated.

"Well, it's kind of mine," he awkwardly confessed. The old lady crooned to the baby, her face aglow.

"Long-trail," thought Ben. He recalled a radio song, "King for a Day!" That was it—"King for a day," and then long-trail. Life was full of catches. The old lady seemed to tire from excitement, and he led her back to her seat where she once more sat nodding to the train's rhythm, still with the half-smile of acceptance softening her face. Watching her, Ben wondered if his own years would sneak up on him like this, leaving him no longer puzzled, merely accepting. Anyway, he'd still do some fighting.

He nearly had to do some fighting later in the day when Doyle stormed indignantly upon him. "You know what that goofy professor did? He slunk in there while I was out for a minute and gave baby a big piece of cholate. Baby got it in his mouth and all over his face and hands, and even some in one eye. The man's a murderer at heart, mark my word. He'd like to dissect babies the way they do frogs and guinea-pigs. I told him so, and he smiled in that sickening way and said chocolate was known the world over to be a sound food. I want you to scold him good."

"All right, all right," said Ben placatingly.

"Woman is a mystery," the professor was presently telling him.

"They're clearing up a lot of that, the way they dress nowadays," Ben answered.

"What I mean—" the professor patiently began.

But Ben left him. Anyway, he had gone the family two better in the matter of assistants, even if his work

was going to be cut out for him. But perhaps none of it would matter, for the old lady now showed him a newspaper; her home paper Ben guessed, and she was telling him that nothing new ever happened.

"Every week they print things 'Twenty years ago,' or even 'Fifty years ago,' and they're the same things that happened last week. I can't see any difference. Once last month they had my own wedding under 'Fifty years ago.' Wasn't that funny?"

"Nothing ever happens," thought Ben. Some day the Branlock Advertiser would print that twenty years ago he returned from New York with a lot of trouble for everyone. Still, that paper would never be able to print that he'd become anything but a cowman. He'd never be style-conscious—only cow-conscious.

He went outside to watch the flat lands of Nebraska recede and to draw deeper breaths of an air already superior. Doyle was there, still raging; she pointed out distant objects of interest to her child: "See the funny house! See the funny cows! See the funny man on the horse!" She was trying to make the child forget its disaster with chocolate. "Did the nas'y old man give 'ums nas'y old black stuff—awful bitter!" Doyle contorted her face in the manner of one tasting a nauseous substance. No sooner had she lost her fear of some snooping old policeman than another danger menaced. That goofy professor pretending to know so much about babies, behaviorism and locomotor functions and all that silliness! She would watch that man.

"Pretty soon we'll climb," Ben told her; "pretty soon the high country!" His dark eyes glistened.

The following day his excitement continued to

mount. Between intervals of rapid speech he resorted to nervous whistling. His hearers were enabled to identify the air as "Rock-a-bye-baby," but only by certain structural traces.

"Every single note he gets sour," declared Whitey.

"Why can't he act calm like he tells other people to?" Miss Ellis wanted to know. "Look at me. I feel like the new heiress that they found the missing will for, hid away back of the clock, but I can keep cool about it. First thing that old boy knows he'll work up a temperature."

Ben's fervor increased so that on that last day the predicted temperature seemed imminent. "At last we're getting somewhere," he told them.

"We been getting somewhere every day," Miss Ellis reminded him. "Of course it didn't look so much like it, back there in those flat places."

"You'll find plenty of stacked land from now on," he promised her. "We're getting somewhere at last. No use talking, these trains got it all over a wagon or cayuse. You can see yourself get somewhere." He dwelt briefly on the wonders of steam transportation and its superiority over an older method, breaking at length into his untuneful whistle.

The train crossed a small river in spring tumult, and the whistling ceased. "See that creek? That's Little Antelope." The party regarded it from the observation platform. "Once, before the railroad, a bunch of us had to cross it in flood; stiff current, deep and cold; rough bottom. The saddlers swum all right, but the rest of the string got to milling, biting, kicking, trying to shed their packs in midstream. One of them

with my bed-roll on him made for deep water and me trying to rise out of my stirrups because that cold creek was lapping alongside of the saddle seat! What I yelled out wasn't for any lady audience." He whistled again, and Miss Ellis had learned about railroads. She had supposed that railroads were naturally there; always had been.

"Five o'clock we're due," Ben told them, "and the brakeman says we're on time." The brakeman had said this more than once and had begun to look bored.

"You're going to have a temperature," Miss Ellis warned him. But he was not to be quelled; memorable landmarks were now flashing by, and he regaled them with salty items. Biographic morsels overlapped, due to the train's speed and because there were digressions for incidental comment. Whitey had brought him a basket of unseasonable and expensive grapes intended as a sedative. The grapes were welcomed, but Ben's talk triumphed over minor obstacles. At intervals in his speech came now a vocable approximately 'Fut-woof!' which, in English, meant the adroit expulsion of grape skins, and the saga ran on:

"Yonder's the old P. J. Knapp place. Pete married that oldest Prindle girl, a good-built girl—Fut-woof!—like Pete said, 'One of these fine-looking animals in a black velvet dress.' . . . Look yonder at those sheep—poor stock; you can tell by the wrinkles in their necks. . . . So, after Peter died, his oldest boy bought him a racing stable and married a little blonde fixin' out of a show and ran through everything. . . . A lot of that dairy stock you see out beyond there is tubercular; fed too much alfalfa. . . . So Mat Bartle says to

her if she can overlook his taking a few drinks now and then, he'll marry her, and it was the sage-brush for her if she didn't. . . . Those umbrella trees are the best shade trees in the world if you plant for the next generation. . . . Anyway, she married Mat, and when this bond issue on the B. and J. ditch came out Mat was in New York and wired back for a hundred thousand dollars' worth—afraid he'd be too late if he wrote a letter. He wouldn't have been; he could have sent a boy across country on a bicycle with the order and still got his bonds. So Mat gets into this bond scandal good and plenty. . . .

"Look at the team at work over there and look at your watch. A quarter to one; how do they get a man back to work at that hour? I ain't able to. . . . Well, about that time Mat gets to going with a widow lady that had brought in a stock of New York millinery—one of these willowy blondes. . . . Look at that grass; they call it poverty grass—no joints in the stem—grass without joints won't hold moisture. . . . There's another of those cement schoolhouses. . . . So Ella got wise, and then she meets this Grannis boy that his father had sent him out to tame the West with one of these mustaches that looks like every hair's been put in with a pegging awl and— Somebody got that jack-rabbit before he could cross the highway. I ran over one once; cried like a child until I went back and killed it. . . . Well, this so-and-so-willowy blonde with the millinery—

"See the big white house with columns yonder on that slope, with the cedars around it? That's the old Byles Morton place. Byles left it in trust to be a

preachers' home—preachers that had got old and feeble. It started off fine with about twenty such, but only run for six months. The trustees had to shut down because the old gentlemen got so bitter about religion on account of having all kinds there. Fact! Morning, noon and night was just one scrap; got so they couldn't have a meal of victuals without breaking up in a row; hardly one of them speaking to any of the others except of his own kind. The trustees turned the place into a home for feeble schoolteachers. Doing right well that way, I understand. I guess schoolteachers don't have so much to fight about. . . . Notice that new windmill there on the Glen Parslow place? Looks right pretty, don't it? . . . Here we come to Lanark. That reminds me—"

There had been whistling intermezzos, and the grapes were gone. Miss Ellis threatened to take his temperature if he didn't keep quiet. Ben ignored this and began his Iliad anew. He had returned from afar and was overcome by memorable sights.

Their train halted briefly at small towns and hardly could he finish the history of one before another engaged him. They ran in the center of a wide green valley, mountains with their approaching foot-hills hazily distant on either side. A willow-fringed stream tumbled after them beside the track. No longer did Ben need to ask the brakeman. He knew the timetable now and had but to consult his watch at the stops; nor did he hear the brakeman's call of Branlock, in a tired voice, as if it were just any place. Ben was feverishly in the vestibule, bags in hand, shoulders up, eyes gleaming. He had returned from afar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SO this is the big shot," said Miss Ellis, politely trying to commend what was visible of Branlock from the station platform.

"You can't see much from here," Ben warned her.

"Not on a bet," agreed Miss Ellis.

Ben went to shake hands boisterously with Art Dugdale, who lounged forward. Trunk checks were produced.

"Bring 'em out in the truck," Ben directed, "and better hustle some of these satchels in along with 'em. I'll drive the car. We got a baby."

"Baby?" inquired Art Dugdale. He was a youngish bleak-faced man who suddenly changed it all by smiling widely.

"Thar's gold in them teeth," whispered Miss Ellis; she, nevertheless, looked long at the subject of her comment, because he was recognizably a cowboy.

Ben hurried them into a car and took the wheel. They skirted Branlock in gaining their road. Ben would feel unsafe until the ranch was reached. That was sanctuary. There—he recalled a boyish game—he could say, "King's X." Nor did he regard with more than a furtive side glance the splendid new Carcross mansion adorning a slightly eminence at the edge of town. He knew it without looking at it—a thing of embrasured towers, mullioned windows, arched doorways, full of studies and day beds, period whatnots and do-funnies,

with Hercule, the butterfly, looking proud, cherishing with slender fingers his tiny mustache. Just now Ben had other things to look at. The air was of a silken softness that yet pricked the skin. Though shadows were long, there were still vast reaches of sunshine where the lower hills unfolded to far views of green.

Through the town streets Ben drove with acceptable caution, but on reaching the open road emotion overwhelmed him and he became erratic at the wheel, gazing off to distant purlieus, as the professor had called them; taking a hand from the wheel at sharp turns to point for the edification of his party. Its members refused to be edified and urged caution. Doyle threatened to take her child and walk; the professor said, to cover his trepidation by light speech, "What a vast and winsome lea," waving at square miles of grazing-land, his other hand gripping a seat back and his feet applying brakes not there.

"Never had an accident yet," the driver assured them, and told of the time he had driven an affectionate calf over this same road. He widely pointed to a distant horse standing in an attitude of dejection beside a wire fence.

"That's a horse all over for you. Acres of good grass there, but he's got to cut himself—that is, if he's any good as a horse. A common scrub will keep away from wire. But you take a good horse and give him some barbed wire to get at and he's happy. Look at that fool. Trying to get a foot between the strands; if he can't do that he'll rub his shoulder against the barbs just where the collar comes. Wouldn't I like to quirt him aplenty out of there."

"Please!" Doyle besought him. He ceased to point for the moment.

"Ditch running bankful," he observed. "I was afraid the feed might be kind of pinchy, but it ain't." He was again cautioned because he had pointed at the ditch; this made him impatient.

"Blastoderm!" he muttered. It was a word he had picked up from the professor; a bully swearing word he considered it. "Didn't I tell you I never had an accident yet?"

"Many good drivers never have any accident but their first," the professor anxiously remarked, still gripping the car with hands and feet.

"For once he said a mouthful in plain English," Miss Ellis remarked to Whitey.

"I've lived through worse," Whitey answered. "But I hope my wiring holds."

Ben continued cheerfully inattentive to his wheel. "That turn we're coming to is where the calf nearly sent me into the ditch." He made the turn this time by a margin too narrow to please any but himself.

They traversed a spreading flat meadow to which a gate admitted them. The hazards of their course were here increased because the meadow was giving sustenance to a herd of white-faced cattle with their calves, and Ben had to look in both directions from the home road. "As fair a sight as you'd want to see," he told them. It seemed that only by a superb self-control was he kept from leaving the car to fraternize with his stock.

Then two hills parted as the road curved to reveal the ranch buildings. A low, long-fronted, weathered

house with detached buildings near it—a huge barn, farther outbuildings.

“We’re not house-proud,” Ben told them.

“It looks like a palace,” said Doyle. “Anything would, after this.”

Another gate held open by Art Dugdale, who had passed them in his truck and had looked back with lively speculation in his glance.

The car halted at the house front and Ben demanded, “How could you ride safer than that?”

Miss Ellis alighted, swept the surrounding landscape with a dusky glance and said, “So this is mountains!” She had seen pictures of mountains.

Professor Abercrombie scanned the ranch-house. “Thrown together with an affectation of rude simplicity,” he remarked.

“No affectation,” Ben said. He and Art were taking bags from the car. Doyle descended, but with no eye for mountains, because her baby was crowing; unquestionably the sounds it made had a calculated rhythm.

“Now then,” said Ben, “go in and make yourselves at home.” He meant this, but more than all he meant, “Now I’d like to see anyone nag me!” He hustled after his guests; saw them to their rooms, hospitably, but with no loss of time. He wanted to talk with his foreman.

Art Dugdale awaited him in what Ben must now think of as his study—a long, low-ceilinged room with rugs of Navaho weave on the floor, the walls hung with portraits of prize bulls superbly modeled, with countenances of a large and placid benevolence. The foreman furlled his length on a leather couch through

the center of which a spring protruded. Ben sat at his roll-top desk in a swivel chair that would creakily revolve but half the radius intended by its maker. He lifted his feet to a support drawn from beneath the desk top and began, "Well, boy, what's the bad news?"

"Not a thing, Mr. Carcross."

"Must be something bad."

"Everything dandy; we got at least an eighty-five per cent calf crop."

"How's that new bunch of bulls?"

"Dandy animals."

"Not a thing gone wrong?"

"Not a thing here, Mr. Carcross. You look some faded yourself."

"That's right, Art. I was plumb devastated; they nearly had me all killed up."

"Well I'll be darned, Mr. Carcross!"

Ben went to his hand bag on the table and withdrew a bottle of bourbon. "Everything being so," he said, "I'll just garner me a few drinks." From a shelf over the stone fireplace he took a corkscrew, but paused in the work of broaching his bottle to scowl at a broom standing beside him. "How many times I got to tell this help to keep a broom standing upside down? It makes 'em last twice as long." Savagely he reversed the broom and poured a drink. "I don't encourage this among the help, Art, but it's persuading stuff, and I'll ask you to join me in a little nip." Art brought a glass. Ben sat again and turned his chair shrilly, so that he might look out of the window.

He faced the barnyard beyond the house fence, still but half convinced that things could have gone right in

his absence. Suddenly he had proof that his doubts were well founded. At one of the feed racks within his vision stood a bony gray horse idly mouthing hay between the bars. He was an elderly horse and nonchalant in his attack on the hay, twitching it out between the bars, allowing much to fall to the ground, where he pawed it. Ben hotly directed his foreman's attention to this outrage.

"Look at that worn-out old skate wasting our good hay! And he ain't worth his salt; don't do a thing but loaf around and waste hay other horses have earned. I spoke about this once before, remember? I tell you we got to do something with those racks; fix 'em some way. They let a horse pull hay out and eat a mouthful and stomp the rest into the mud. Gosh! You'd think we were made of hay the way they act—kind of endowed with it." He turned impatiently to his drink, finished it, and poured again.

"That's better liquor than we get here, Mr. Carcross. The sheriff's got some over to the jail now that's plain spitfire. Two drinks and you want to fight your mother."

"Yeah!" Ben had forgotten the wasteful horse. "They got some few good things in New York—drink and food. I was having some wonderful store meals there until that assassin got his rope on me. I et everything I could say the name of."

He sipped the second drink and turned again to the window, but there was now a kinder light in his eyes. "Old Veazey's still stomping that hay into the mud," he reported, yet without rancor. He reverted to New York restaurants. "Say, Art, ever notice how

these diplomats are such good cooks? The bill of fare at this New York hotel had diplomat this and diplomat that—sauce diplomat, eggs diplomat—some of it right amusing food. I don't know how diplomats get to be that way."

Art didn't know either.

"You know, before that danged money I used to have to read a bill of fare from right to left, but not any longer. You'd be surprised what I blew in for my supper sometimes."

"I'll bet," said Art.

"Seen the family lately?"

"Yesterday; Mrs. Carcross wanted me to bring some old stuff out here. It's a fair sight, that mansion."

"I glimpsed it, going by."

"Inside and out. They let me into one of the rooms yesterday. Pretty fancy, I'll say."

"All folderoled up—period furniture, eh?"

Art Dugdale coughed with sudden embarrassment and stammered indistinctly.

"What say?" demanded Ben.

"Well, I wasn't meaning to say anything, Mr. Carcross, but I taken a good look and maybe you ought to be told. It seems to me like that French lad has sawed off a lot of second-hand furniture on you people."

"Not on me," said Ben firmly.

"Well, on someone; I seen some mighty old chairs in that room, like as if they had been throwed out of a church. They look grand, but they're hell to set in. I tried one when they wasn't noticin'."

"We're still running this ranch place, though," Ben

said meaningly. He finished his drink, poured another and, after a searching glance through the window, reported: "That silly old skeesicks keeps right on tromping good hay."

"We'll certainly have to change them racks," said Art Dugdale.

"Be sure to get at it first thing tomorrow. How's the old general keeping busy?"

"Well, sir, the old general's going into things in a big way—big things; that's what he says. He's acting very important. I met him for a minute in town yesterday and he bought me some refreshment."

Ben sipped his latest drink. "You got a second cook to look after this bunch of mine?"

"I got Ah Fong that's been cooking at the Sip and Bite Grotto in town."

"I guess he'll do all right. This is a pretty good bunch. That tall one can talk about the hardest subjects in the world for half an hour as easy as laughing."

"That young one is a right personable-looking lady," Art remarked casually.

"That one knows all about what's inside you and what to do for it," said Ben. "I'll bet she can tell you things about the human frame that Doc Snell himself wouldn't know." He finished his drink and stretched voluptuously. "By golly, you don't know how I've wanted to be right on this spot." His gaze wandered to the window. The pale fires of sunset illumined the aged white horse still extravagantly twitching hay from the rack, but making small pretense of eating any.

"Look at good old Veazey letting on he's hungry.

I want to tell you, Art, that horse in his time was the best little cutting horse in this whole outfit. A danged shame if he couldn't waste hay at his time of life!"

"I'll change them racks sure tomorrow."

Ben sat down his glass and again gazed fondly at good old Veazey. "Yes, sir, that little horse was the mostest horse on this ranch at one time."

"I got an idea for changing them racks over—"

"What you want to meddle with our racks for? Ain't hay the one thing we always can find plenty of?" Ben's tone was a little sharp.

"Sure!" said Art.

"What you doing tomorrow?"

"I'd planned for Dusty and me to take a bunch of young stuff over to the Applegate place where we leased that pasture. Sort of lighten the strain on Big Meadow."

"Fine! I'll ride with you. Have Red Joe saddled for me. I'll eat some breakfast in the mess-house. What cook you got for the boys now?"

"It's that Portugee, Maria, from the big house."

So Maria had refused to saddle up for the St. John Smythes. "And say, Art, this Miss—I mean Mrs.—Doyle, she wants milk for that kid from just one cow. It's some kind of a notion she had. These dairy cows been tested lately?"

"Not a T.B. germ on the place. I'll pick out one from the dairy herd. That russet-headed lady is a very forward-speaking one. I just heard her berating the timber-line agent for handing her kid a kitten to play with. The kid was trying to chew it up."

"Trust her; she's half Irish, half coyote; that girl

will be riding the professor with a hackamore before he's a day older. He knows a lot of hard words about babies, but very few facts, I gather. And this baby is a genuine wonder baby; probably the smartest baby in the world, bar none."

"Sure, I'll bet he is."

"We're planting him on this ranch the way I planted that tree out there fifty-two-odd years ago. His mother—" Ben coughed with difficulty. "Well, she's my secretary companion."

"That's all right with me, Mr. Carcross."

"Old Veazey is sure having a lot of fun with his hay," said Ben fondly.

When he went to his room for the night he recalled another night of long ago; he had gone dutifully to bed, pulling the covers to his chin to hide the clothes he had not chosen to take off, because the next day was a Fourth of July and he wished no needless delay in going to his two bunches of firecrackers. He felt a like exultation now. Still, he had to change his clothes anyway, so he might as well undress.

He decided again that Whitey had been right about time. Time was only a measure of movement; nothing in itself, no matter how ruinous the years they marked it by. He had never left the Lone Tree and, anyway, today would soon be yesterday. He dozed off on slightly ruffled memories of the South Ranch where all the trouble had been made for a formerly contented cattleman. If there ever should be a smell of oil here he'd try to hide it. No trouble like that on peaceful Lone Tree.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MRS. ST. JOHN SMYTHE had, in Ben's argot, oozled into his room at the ranch with a manner archly confidential. Addie, the girls, and Hercule were scattered about outside, and Ben, having allowed them to observe what a cowman might really need in the way of secretaries and companions, had secluded himself at his desk on the subterfuge of important letters. Mrs. St. John Smythe, revealing the elegance possible to severe simplicity in attire, with a pleasing tinge of the rugged West in her felt hat and sports shoes, approached now, almost with a finger on her lip, a look of discreet understanding in her wise eyes.

"Your little one has *chic*," she told him, almost coyly.

"His little one?" Ben had recently gathered that to have *chic* meant to be fussy about clothes, and he was puzzled by the application of this term to a baby, who, to his observation, was never dressed with any fussy regard to style.

"Oh, sure, he's got a lot of *chic* for his age."

Mrs. St. John Smythe now bantered him with the glance of a woman who has long known what men are:

"Ah, you fence with me." She prettily shook a finger at him. "I refer, naturally, to your *belle amie*."

This did nothing to relieve Ben's slight perplexity. "Sure, *chic* all over the place. It's the mode trend."

Gail here came in, and Mrs. St. John Smythe retreated with a last shake of the bantering finger.

"I've just been having a simply wonderful talk with your Dr. Abercrombie," Gail announced. "He's very advanced, very daring, isn't he?"

"An awfully decent chap," Ben assured her airily, wondering if the professor could be a doctor like Pete Snell. Maybe the cuss really knew something useful after all. But another problem for the moment engaged him.

"Listen, Gail; you learned the French language—how to think in it, and all like that."

"Well"—Gail was gracefully apologetic—"of course I haven't kept up my French since we left Paris; still—"

"Well, you ought to know this one. What does 'bel-lamy' mean?"

Gail was well beyond this in the book, even over into irregular verbs and the tricky subjunctive. "Why, *belle amie* is simple. It means 'beautiful friend.' *Belle*—beautiful—*amie*—friend."

So that was all? Ben had thought the old lady was acting as if she had something on him. But for all that mysterious manner of hers she had only meant "beautiful friend." He had, he considered, more than one of those. Somewhat relieved, he went with Gail to join the party outside.

Addie was there, perturbed, he had been pleased to note, yet trying to carry it off with a manner. She now engaged him in a laughing chat about Hercule, who stood near by clad in knickerbockers and topped by one of the Chugwater hats. Even Addie saw the

incongruity in this combination, but Hercule was such a child and liked to believe he was adopting in some degree the dress of this remote western province.

"He looks so quaint in his plus fours," said Addie.

"Plus fours?" Ben had thought they were sports clothes, the kind they wished to scandalize his own legs with. Probably the tassel daintily dangling below each knee made the difference. Still—"Plus fours, hey? That boy's legs are plus nothing. He's got minus legs."

Ben laughed heavily at his joke, and Addie shushed him, but still with that secret manner of carrying something off. He had thought she possibly began to realize that it might not be wise to show a convinced cattleman too much mode trend either in dress or in secretary companions.

In New York it had seemed to him that Addie, after twenty-five years of married life, was beginning to suspect that she had married beneath her. He wasn't feeling this so clearly now. Perhaps he had taken some of it out of her with his impressive staff; no butlers exactly, but plenty of people to make her think twice before she got peckish at him again.

Addie, in truth, after observing Miss Ellis and the strange Mrs. Doyle, with a new baby and a wedding ring apparently quite as new, had been furtively regarding him with something he astoundedly felt was close to respect. They were both relieved of a constraint novel to them when Presh sounded the horn of the car in which he had driven the party out. Presh, as Ben had predicted to himself, was reverting to type. Not only did he flaunt his Chugwater hat, the fawn-

skin vest, and rattlesnake stickpin, but he challenged convention in an ineptly tailored suit of garish stripes and had enlarged his collection of gauds with a fob of rattlesnake skin jeweled with another set of rattles from this picturesque reptile. Presh's ophidian complex had reconquered the areas lost in old Europe.

For the first time in their association Ben felt a warming glow for Presh. That kid had been shown the mode trend aplenty, but here he was, still a blanket Indian. He was one they couldn't nag out of himself. He still wanted a classy garage, didn't look forward to wintering some place, or to tea on the lawn or house parties; nor would he envelop his bony frame in sports clothes. Ben resolved to endow Presh with a garage that would reduce all other garages to the squalid aspect of wrecking dumps.

Gail, in the departing car, was analyzing the wonderful Dr. Abercrombie: "He's so very advanced; I dare say the man has broadened into the higher unbelief. I couldn't quite pin him down to it, but I'm almost positive he seriously doubts the existence of God."

"Why Ben should have felt any need for such a man—" Addie gestured bewilderment.

"And an aviator," put in Vannie. "Unless he means to take up flying. Of course, that's getting to be *chic*."

"I shall never permit him to leave the ground," firmly announced Addie.

"If you ask me," said Vannie, "he's up in the air already." She giggled at this, but no one joined her.

"Say, people, that's a couple of classy dames he brought along; they look to me like hot numbers."

This was, regrettably, Presh. Addie burned him with a look.

"Of course, I should never believe that my husband could have the slightest interest in creatures of that sort."

"Liar!" to herself said Mrs. St. John Smythe in the aboriginal or Chicago manner.

"Remember how Bill Hepburn acted after he struck oil," said Vannie.

"Absurd!" exclaimed Gail. "Those are worthy girls enough, but Ben could never derive the slightest stimulus from the conversation of their sort."

"It wasn't conversation Bill Hepburn went around looking for," put in the perhaps cynical Presh.

"Don't be silly," chid Mrs. Carcross. "I know Ben has some new developments in mind for the ranch, and he has felt the need of expert advice."

Hercule and his mother, who had remained silent, exchanged guarded but shining glances.

"That Miss Ellis looks like an expert in some things," remarked Vannie, only to be chilled by the resulting silence.

But in the intimacy of negligées that night, in a boudoir hung with simply wonderful bargains in Renaissance brocade, Addie and her sisters became tense about Ben.

"Of course," Addie began, "I can never bring myself to believe that Ben has so far forgotten himself—"

"How absurd at his age!" Gail confirmed.

"Still, look at Bill Hepburn," persisted Vannie.

"But that creature took to evil courses long before

he became wealthy," replied Addie, "while Ben has always shown himself so steady-going. A plodder, year after year, his mind on nothing but his eternal ranch and the price of beef." She paused reflectively in the process of learning what cold cream could do for that one stubborn fold beneath her chin. "Do you know, girls, there was something really quite wholesome about his old steady ways, even if he had no dreams of something higher. I would as soon have thought of the rock of Gibraltar bounding around in the ocean."

"A blonde and a brunette," murmured Vannie musingly. "And a child," she thoughtfully added.

"But of course—" Addie began.

"Of course not," confirmed Gail.

"And yet," Addie went on, "why an aviator and a doctor of philosophy?"

"He's so completely educated," cried Gail. "He'll begin about something 'on the one hand,' and give you that in the most exquisite English, and then he'll begin about the same thing 'on the other hand,' and give that to you in the most attractive way. Poor Ben must have been simply swept off his feet by the man's learning. I really don't wonder he was fascinated by such unusual scholarship."

Vannie came back to her main point. "And by a fiery blonde and a brunette little flutter-budget. I'm sure that girl starves herself to keep her lines down."

Addie sighed and applied herself to the threatening fold with renewed energy. It presently appeared that they could agree on one aspect of this possibly distressing complication.

"Money has simply gone to the poor fellow's head," Addie summed up.

"Sudden wealth has gone to the heads of many men even as straight-laced and methodical as Ben has always shown himself," added Gail.

"Of course it's money," Vannie groaned. "The mere idea of it simply sent him haywire. Even that operation; I bet you anything he needn't have had it. It was probably something Dr. Snell could have attended to."

"I suspected that," Addie gently said, "and there may have been some after-effect of the operation that has left him erratic."

Vannie robed herself in the sable cloak of prophecy, using a phrase learned east of Branlock. "Mark my words, poor Ben will come a cropper. A mania like that always grows on them; they can't listen to reason."

Addie paused again from the grim massage. The pause meant that Ben would come no very sensational cropper if a watchful wife, having suddenly perceived the need for diplomacy, could prevent it. She cautioned the others:

"Remember, we musn't say anything to alarm him; he mustn't suspect that we consider him anything but his old normal self."

The wisdom of this course having been determined, the conference fell to a discussion of Portuguese Maria. "Cooking where she belongs—for a bunch of roughnecks," said Vannie.

"Can you imagine the sloppy old thing coming to the door of the dining-room that second morning with a half-burned cigarette in her mouth and shouting, 'You bet!' when poor dear Hercule wanted more

bacon?" This indictment was brought by Gail. "I was never so embarrassed in my life, though Hercule and his mother took it like the splendid sports they are."

Addie silently kneaded the unruly chin. Maria, uncorseted, with a half-cigarette always between her lips and a cheerful response of "You bet!" to all calls for service, was now a closed scandal. She would concern herself only with those that still menaced. The money had gone to poor Ben's head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*L*ONE TREE was congealing to routine after the recent influx. The professor had unrolled the traveling rug inclosing his stick and umbrella, and now had these articles conveniently placed. If rain fell he walked abroad under the umbrella, to the pleased astonishment of all observers. On sunny days he walked with the cane; "barged about," as he put it. After his first walk he reported the presence of a choice police dog in a neighboring field—"A field flowered with amaranth and asphodel."

He was told by Art Dugdale that neither of these plants grew on Lone Tree and that the observed police dog had been a coyote. One of the professor's eyebrows disbelieved, though he afterward described the animal he had seen as undoubtedly feral and probably a jackal.

He liked the farm. Freed at last from what he termed scholastic trammels, he liked to be environed with immensity. Ben told him there was enough immensity around Lone Tree to environ a lot of folks. The professor thought it an exceptional landscape effect and was glad, he confided to Whitey, that the recreational opportunities were not such as would tempt him from his work.

Whitey himself had found an abundance of recreational opportunities, chiefly in the blacksmith shop. He had put an immobilized truck back into commission

on the second day and was now driving it between the ranch and town.

Miss Ellis liked best those later hours of the day when veritable cowboys jogged in from toil on tired horses. The most of these on Lone Tree she secretly considered to be sad sandwiches; unquestionably they were a shy lot, less enterprising than the males hitherto encountered by this critic in a great city.

"They're so darned respectful," she confided to Doyle.

Still there were exciting moments, as when she perched on the topmost plank of the circular breaking-coral to watch one of them topping colts that had never been sat on. Her presence, no doubt, brought an added dash to the labors so expertly pursued below her. There was class to this, and she liked it better than what she saw one morning in the dehorning chute. She reported to Doyle that a lot of young cows—all the ranch animals to Miss Ellis were either cows or horses—were having their horns bobbed, but it was too messy a sight even for a girl who had watched operations.

There was, again, the marking of a bunch of young stuff in a way that shocked all her notions of surgical cleanliness. "Do you know what they do?" she asked Doyle. "You won't believe it. They throw the poor things down with a lasso rope and cut a long strip to hang from under the neck—I guess they call it a dew-lap—then, instead of applying an antiseptic, they simply pick up a handful of that terrible dirt and slap it right into this cut. Can you imagine? I'll bet Mr. Carcross doesn't know about that."

Doyle, too, was shocked and considered it her duty to report the hygienic outrage to the ranch's owner. They were both aghast to learn that he had long known of the practice and would condone it even after being sternly lectured about the perils of infection. The owner of the Lone Tree was rejoicing in that walk of life to which it had pleased God to call him. He wanted everyone to indulge in innocent merrymaking, but he had no mind to rebel against established customs.

Doyle, of course, was being a secretary companion to the wonder baby. She had apparently not yet learned that she was environed with immensity or that she could behold exceptional landscape effects by raising her eyes. Doyle might have been back in the bad lands. She had eyes only for her child, and him she kept snubbed down, as Ben put it: "Never let's herself get a rope's length away from him."

Ben had been wordily told of the reason for this—Professor Abercrombie. The professor was a diligent note-taker and craved close association with this infant for worthy purposes of his own; an association too often tartly denied him for reasons that to Doyle were all-sufficing. She heard about factors that make for expanded consciousness and said these might be all right in their place, but that if the professor was going to start anything with a view to mobilizing the child's mid-brain she would be right there to oversee it. Her own bluntly stated belief was that the mid-brain mobilized when it got good and ready, without any outside help from a certain busybody.

The professor laughed with a biting sarcasm, but this got him no place. He told Ben over a drop of bour-

bon one night that Doyle might not yet be a mental case, but that she betrayed a condition of incipient mental instability—an unstable nervous equilibrium—that promised—why mince words?—to result in intermittent lunacy.

Ben, while admitting that he had noticed precisely this, pointed out that a woman is a woman, a comment the professor declared to possess the unimpeachable validity of a textbook. Ben himself believed that the baby ate too much and slept too much. When it wasn't doing one it was doing the other.

The professor on this point was pleased to reassure him: "The food produces a tranquillizing lethargy; the ensuing sleep is not without its benefits to the little beggar, and only in the brief waking periods have I tried my small experiments."

"I certainly hope you don't start a fray," Ben told him, "because—" He went on to explain that the bull shuts its eyes in charging, while the female of the species—

The professor was interested and at once made copious notes of the phenomenon. Then he became less preceptorial and complimented Ben upon his powers of observation. A knowledge of this sex differentiation, he said, might in the past have saved him much unfruitful conjecture.

Ben wondered if the professor hadn't sometime been in a woman scrape. There were other obvious things the poor cuss didn't find out too easily. He still believed Ben to be a gentleman farmer who had retired to this country place after attaining independence in some active business. He'd known several chaps in the

East who had followed this wise course. Ben merely looked glum. He had tried so often and so patiently to explain.

From a window they watched Doyle in her most favored retreat—a grassy stretch under that one stately fir tree in a corner of the yard. Here she read an improving book, though watchfully, while her infant sprawled on a rug. And here, when the sun seemed to make a thin bright music all about them, Doyle would, as Ben described it, strip saddle and blanket from the wonder baby and permit him to acquaint an interested world with the perfections of his torso and his magnificent control of superbly rounded arms and legs. By a skilful regulation of these periods of exposure the wonder baby was becoming a butternut brown over all his excellently modeled surface.

“Nothing runty about the little cuss,” Ben had remarked on one of these occasions.

Miss Ellis would come also to voice a tribute. “I used to think you were nutty, Ginger, but you win, hands down. That brat is certainly the theme song of this ranch.”

Miss Ellis was now permitted, under surveillance, to pat the treasure at suitable moments, even to hold him, and she was quick to note if he crowed at these times. “Nickering,” Ben called it.

“He’ll be an all-talkie in no time,” Miss Ellis declared.

Other beings were attracted by the sun bath of the soon-to-be-all-talkie. Strolling cow hands—glad of any chance to loaf, Ben said—would stand to view the spectacle from a discreet distance, but Ah Fong, cook, was

so frankly entranced that Doyle permitted his near approach and even the occasional poke of a clean finger into the well-covered ribs. At least she permitted this intimacy until the morning Ah Fong showed that he knew not a bit more about young babies than any doctor of philosophy by bringing a box of his native sweetmeat for this one's refection. After that Ah Fong had to hold up both hands before he could approach. Doyle couldn't bring herself to banish him entirely—he was so abject in his adoration.

Then there were kittens such as the professor had appeared to consider a wholesome diet for the young. They overran Doyle's lap; active kittens that sounded overpurred—purrs that threatened to rend asunder their fragile frames. But they were kept from the baby.

And there was Snooper, the dog; a large brownish dog, blunt of shape and plainly a dog of low extraction; vagrant offspring of the most casual amours; yet light-hearted despite all the bars-sinister; a dog that had never worried about family. He was old now, the brown hairs tipped with silver and his kindly muzzle of a venerable gray. He slept a great deal and at times in his sleep would complain about life; yet once awake, he would often incongruously break into a puppy playfulness that ill became his years. These outbursts, however, would not be prolonged. A conviction of his present senescence would overtake him, and he would again deport himself as one should who has gone far down into the vale of years.

Snooper had been tremendously excited by Doyle's baby at the very moment of its first revealment under the tree. He began to caper so mad a circle about the

two that Doyle's impulse was to scream for help. Then, divining a good intention back of this turbulent behavior, she had allowed Snooper to approach; even granted him an inquiring whiff or two of the child, after which she voiced an order which Snooper recognized as coming from one who would stand no nonsense. Now he usually slept near by, arising only to follow Doyle when she took her child in. Each new day Snooper was allowed to bring his nose near enough to prove that this was still a baby. Doyle felt that Snooper would protect them both from wild beasts and from any strolling brute of a policeman.

The owner of the ranch often overlooked these scenes, letting his eyes ascend the stately length of his tree to the tip of its far spire, then bringing them back to that other seedling he had helped a strange woman to plant. This always made his chest swell in a curious manner. At such times he was but a seedling himself, with life before him.

At first he had begged his companions and secretaries to let him drive them about the ranch; he wanted to show them the ditches running bank-full and a thousand white-faced calves with their mothers, and the good stand of hay coming along in fields near and far. A lot of wonderful things he wanted to show them, but his invitations were persistently declined, except when he would consent that Whitey drive. Ben was a little hurt by this; he'd never had an accident, had he?

Art Dugdale told Whitey about Ben as a driver while they sat on their heels in the lee of the big barn and companionably chewed straws: "The boss can't throw off old habits. He drives a car like a buckaroo

rides a horse. If a chuck-hole is in the road he looks for the car to side-step it like a sensible cayuse would. Once him and me was coming over Beaverhead Pass; road cut out of a mountain and falling a thousand feet at the edge. He's hugging the bank instead of keeping to the outside where he belonged. I taken the liberty to tell him: 'Mr. Carcross, you better keep to the right, going around these curves. You could have a smash-up with a car coming on its own right side!' He says, 'Well, you know yourself if you rode a horse close to that edge and he stumbled, it might be thirty feet before he could right himself and he might take you over the cliff!' I guess he still thinks he's riding when he's only driving."

"I wouldn't even want him to ride me the way he come out here the other night," said Whitey.

"Funny thing," Art Dugdale went on. "He's driving through Lanark and got a puncture on the main street and stopped on the spot to change his tire—spang in the middle of the only business street in town. Wouldn't even roll over to the curb for fear of hurting his tube. They pinched him and fined him five dollars for obstructing the traffic. He said the town never had any traffic and he now calls all its inhabitants a bunch of crooks. Some funny little close ways he's got. If you want to get a rise out of him, switch that broom from upside down to right side up. He says they last twice as long the other way. I taken that same broom from the town house out here eight years ago, and it wasn't any new broom even then. You'd think how long does he count a dollar broom should last?"

Ben Carcross was now young and happy; never

nagged from Branlock, not even too often called from there by telephone. If Addie called him as many as three times in one day she might after the first time be told by the resident doctor of philosophy or another that Mr. Carcross was at the moment in conference with his secretary and had left orders that he must not be disturbed. It was considered wise on Lone Tree that Addie should devote herself exclusively to such details of château furnishing as Hercule, the butterfly, might consent to leave to her. Her husband knew only about furnishing a cattle ranch. In these days halcyons nested on the calming water of Ben's haven; daily he munched the herb called Heart's Ease.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THAT mansion at Branlock—called a château by the resident noblesse of Illinois—was to Ben Carcross nothing less than a pitfall; a snare to be avoided while he gracefully could. His later avoidances having become less than graceful—people simply quit believing an excuse about conferences with his secretary—Ben went to the new house, but not unprotected.

Professor Abercrombie he took, and Miss Ellis. Professor Abercrombie wore sports apparel flapping loosely about him, a flaming cravat awry under an ill-fitting, soft collar, yet his eminence as a scholar would carry off this sartorial negligence.

Miss Ellis, on the other hand, would be looked at more than once by all women with an eye for dress; she still clung to simple lines, but was, she told herself, nothing less than a scenic smash. She remarked further to the same believing listener: "All I need is one sock at that mob." By "mob" the blunt-spoken young woman meant Mrs. Carcross and her sisters—Mrs. Carcross, who had been naughty with her silhouette and therefore could never demand slimmer than a stylish stout, and the sisters, less exigent of dress material, yet who could never seem to forget that they were wearing swell clothes. Miss Ellis looked forward to an encounter on what she had come to regard as the home grounds of the enemy. That bunch might be thinking a lot of things about a girl with class, but what cared she?

In this enhancing mode she would so conduct herself that all beholders, hostile or otherwise, would have to give her good for ladylike speech and a true refinement of manner.

Whitey drove them. Otherwise Mr. Carcross must have gone solitary to his town house; with himself at the wheel, respect him though they did for his qualities of mind and heart, neither of these protective buffers would have braved the ordeal.

They approached the mansion, adorning what the professor instantly identified as a "choice villa site" and halted beneath a porte-cochère which its owner no less instantly identified as a porch without any floor to it.

Ben, already flurried by the elegance of their approach—their road had led through a spacious lawn subjected at the moment to the indignities of a lawnmower—rapped on a massively timbered door without result. Then Miss Ellis pressed a button visible at one side of the door, and they were admitted by a capped and uniformed young woman to an oak-paneled interior.

The face of Mr. Carcross brightened at sight of the menial and he exclaimed, "Well, Hattie Plum, I'll be darned! It's good to see you. How's everything?"

He was sincerely wringing a hand of Hattie Plum as his wife stepped into the hall. She rebuked the menial with a lowering of her brows and seemed about to rebuke Mr. Carcross for his unconventional entente with a servant; then she appeared to think better of this.

"We're still at odds and ends," she apologized, "over our heads in work, but do come in." She led them

through the wide entrance to the drawing-room from which she had emerged, while Hattie Plum slunk into a costly background of paneled oak.

The room was what Ben would have recognized in any house he knew as the "front" room, but grand beyond any he had hitherto invaded. Only in that expensive New York hotel, where they hadn't cared what anything cost, had he encountered so exciting a vista of lofty ceiling, of velvet carpet and decorated expanse of wall. And the apartment was peopled. Hercule, in an artist's smock of pale blue, tensely directed an unsmocked workman in the hanging of window draperies from half-way up a stepladder. Vannie, in pink smock, sprawled in a vast chair, yet was not at ease, for she tapped her teeth with the point of a jeweled pencil and kept a distressed look on Gail. Gail, also in a pink smock, bent her troubled gaze on a small table of fragile design flanked by two chairs. Addie's smock was green. Ben called the smocks aprons and complimented the wearers on their taste in these.

Labor was for a moment suspended by greetings, although Hercule kept to his stepladder and almost at once resumed his crisp directions for the exact draping of a lofty window with its regal curtains of maroon velvet. The professor scanned the *mise en scene* and gaily said, "Spicery and pearls, fabrics of silk and beaten gold."

"You wouldn't believe the pains our Hercule has been at," said Addie. Gail, with still troubled eyes, importantly claimed their notice.

"Perhaps one of you," she began impartially, although her glance patently omitted all of the group

but Professor Abercrombie, "can help me here. I still think the ideal place for this conversational grouping is by that window."

Ben caught "conversational grouping" and was lost, though he tried to look bright and helpful. Vaguely into his perplexity came the memory of a vaudeville turn; a ventriloquist with a talking figure on each knee. That surely had been a conversational grouping, the only one he could recall, but he checked a reference to it because the professor was saying to Gail, "Wholly admirable, I assure you." The professor seemed to know that conversational groupings didn't necessarily involve a ventriloquist.

Addie was now exhibiting another treasure. "A genuine Chippendale settee. Isn't it adorable? Covered in old needle point with *petit-point* panels."

They exclaimed over this—at least Whitey and Ben seemed to exclaim with the others—and were then directed to the Georgian marble mantelpiece. "Such a finely chiseled piece!" said Addie.

"Cupids," put in Ben knowingly after a glance at the sculptured figures.

Addie smiled tolerantly at him and looked up at Hercule, who still from his perch superintended the last difficult fold of his curtains. "That poor dear is so brutally overworked," she said, "and all this after he secured us those wonderful bargains abroad. You'd be surprised at what he paid for that thrilling Chippendale piece."

"Oak-paneled," said Ben, feeling vague.

"Oh, but you must see the dearest Gothic linen-fold oak paneling. It's upstairs, and such a time Hercule

had getting it. And our Elizabethan interior you haven't seen, and the dearest old hand-made and needle-point tapestries that he picked up for a song."

Ben here wanted to say that Hercule must be some singer, but he decided that the speech might be misconstrued.

"Do let me show you some of the finished apartments," begged Addie.

"Apartments, not rooms," thought Ben, as they followed Addie up the polished spread of staircase. They gazed upon the Gothic linen fold of oak paneling—"Truly Elizabethan," Addie warned them. Ben was led to infer that Queen Elizabeth had once been housed by this very paneling, and he made an excursion into England's colorful history. "That Henry VIII was certainly some chaser," he announced. "Say, which one of his wives was this Queen Elizabeth?" He was never told because they were now at the door of his very own study.

Another severely elegant apartment submitting an impressive bulk of mahogany desk to a first glance. An armchair upholstered in Spanish leather was as a vacant throne before the desk, on whose glassy surface was a desk set of hammered metal. Ben's desk at the ranch was a bottle of ink, a pen usually rusted beyond use, and a blotter advertising the Butcher's Gazette. But here were a pen tray, a jewel casket for stamps, a stick of purple wax, with a seal, a purple plume with a pen cut from the quill—other knickknacks he couldn't identify—a veritable copy of Napoleon's own desk set, Addie explained. Ben supposed Hercule to have wormed this out of one of the Napoleon family and

wondered if perhaps Napoleon had sat at that very desk. He looked up at the tapestry on the wall, then found an understandable chair.

"And there's the darling wing chair that Hercule picked up for almost nothing." Ben could discover no wings on the chair, but recalled the price; also a time when Addie would not have been able to consider seven hundred dollars almost nothing. But she was entitled to her fun. "With ball-and-claw feet," said Addie.

Ben was disappointed in wing chairs; he had expected a closer suggestion of flight. "It's a grand study," he loyally applauded.

"Notice the antique Spanish tiles about the fireplace," said Addie. "And you see the walls are done in reds and browns, making a masculine background."

"I can hardly wait to get into it," Ben assured her with a try for impatience. "And how about the general?"

"Poppa's study is down the hall, the last door, and the dear old thing is there now, working his head off."

"I'll take a chance and break in on him," said Ben.

"But you haven't seen the dining-room and we're going to have tea," suggested Addie.

Ben looked at his watch tethered to his person by the quartz chain. Addie grimaced at both. "The rest of you go have tea," he directed, "while I powpow with the general." His serfs obediently followed Addie down the stairs.

The general's study was finished with the sharp elegance of Ben's, and the general, somewhat in negligée,

was enthroned at the same vast desk for which Hercules had obtained another of Napoleon's desk sets. Ben sat in another wing chair, which he hoped might have been picked up for even less than a song.

"You find me up to my ears in work," the general began. "Big things are coming off." He proudly surveyed the litter on his desk, picked up an elaborately engraved prospectus and studied it a moment. "Now, just for one thing, here's a deal I'm about to put over with a big Wall Street and motion-picture man I was lucky enough to contact in the lobby of my New York hotel." He launched into figures that presently sank Ben. "Now, that's plain, isn't it?"

"Plain as day," Ben cordially agreed.

"Well, sir, it's really remarkable how many golden opportunities are offered a man the moment it becomes known that he can swing a tidy bit of capital. You'd be astonished. In every mail I receive more or less tempting offers, but of course I weigh them coolly before deciding."

"Of course," agreed Ben.

"I have accepted nothing not first considered in the cold light of reason. I'm anything but impetuous in my judgments as you must know, Ben. Don't think I am venturing our capital blindly. Why, only yesterday I rejected a tempting offer of the controlling interest in a rubber plantation simply because I couldn't be on the ground to oversee the enterprise in all its angles. Nicaragua is too far away. Caution, my boy; better a safe ten or twenty per cent than a hazardous forty. Yesterday again I declined to invest in the raising of a sunken treasure ship off the island of Mazat-

lan. The treasure is there, beyond the peradventure of a doubt; the ship's papers show it—an immense treasure in bar gold. But again I could not be on the ground—I'm a wretched sailor—and there were certain hazards in the search. I shall concentrate on our home metals—gold, silver, copper, cinnabar—metals from honest mother earth." And on this epic picture the general became grim. "In six months after I have swung only a few of the deals now on hand, I shall have placed us all beyond the reach of want." Ben admired the old boy's spirit and rejoiced with him that at last the general had the freedom of action his talents deserved.

"Go to it, general!" he cordially urged. "Remember your check on that oil money is as good as any of the rest of the family's. You know I made a community chest of it."

"That is a circumstance I shall not forget," answered the general snappily, in what he conceived to be the way of a big Wall Street man. He then refreshed his caller by reading from a prospectus brilliantly toned with optimism.

Ben found his party at tea about a small table in the drawing-room. He refused tea after watching Hercule's expert juggling of a cup and saucer while yet superintending the smockless workman. Hercule's finesse was discouraging to a cowman who didn't particularly crave tea anyhow. He went to survey the paneled-oak dining-room with its gleaming expanse of mahogany table, its lordly front of sideboard in the same desirable wood. At the center of the table's glassy sea was islanded a bowl of tempting fruit. Ben took an apple

and returned to the drawing-room before discovering it to be synthetic. In shamed and secret haste he restored this deceit. Some left-over April fool joke!

There were still the library and the general's portrait to be exhibited. The library, rich with paneling and tapestry, had for its chief treasure over the mantel General Pettigrew in oils.

"Just a tiny tinge of Empire in this darling room," Addie informed them with her air of a museum curatrix.

But Ben was staring with some dismay at the painted likeness—sympathizing with the general. "Why the poor old boy had his erysipelas come back on him in Paris!"

Cries of dismay greeted this well-intentioned criticism. "Ben Carcross, what in the world do you mean?"

Ben pointed. "Well, he had erysipelas last year, and he certainly looks as if it had broke out on him again when that picture was taken."

The artist had undeniably imparted a high tint to his subject's commanding jowls. Addie protested again, switching on lights to aid the critic's faulty vision.

"Now I hope you can see that that painter chap has really achieved a remarkable flesh tint for poppa."

"Oh, yes, now I see," agreed Ben, and the unfortunate incident was closed. At that, he sincerely thought the flesh tint was remarkable.

The interesting call was over. Miss Ellis lounged to the door with others. She had been continuously languid, with a manner not estranging, yet subtly aloof. Graciously entering the talk not with her soul but with a condescending amiability, she had again and again

gravely affirmed to various speeches by others, "One does, doesn't one?" She had used "Aren't I?" and the terms "week-end" and "house guest." She had thrown these off lightly and was prettily appealing with her "Doesn't one?" The girls and Addie had been impressed; the latter to a pensive watchfulness.

Hercule, too, had been impressed and had winked at Ben while regretting his mother's absence. Mrs. St. John Smythe had actually gone to shop in Branlock, having found a shop quaintly named The La Boheme. Also, Hercule disclosed, *maman* had discovered a low *estaminet*—the Fashion Waffle Kitchen—where she actually would consume in public the pastry so quaintly called a waffle. Hercule had been unable to perceive any reason for the name of this comestible.

Outside, Ben kept his party waiting while he strolled to the back of the mansion. Certain remembered art treasures of the former Branlock home he had missed. He found a basement door open and presently entered a room cluttered with the too-evidently discarded objects he sought. He couldn't take everything at once, but he issued with an armload; noticeably a section of drain pipe lustrous with silver paint from which protruded five graceful cattails with silvered stocks and gilded tufts; also conspicuous, a long-prized steel engraving of Washington braving the Delaware.

He had the cattails—five years ago these had been his birthday present from Vannie—in the car before Addie detected him from the house entrance.

"Why, Ben Carcross! That frumpy old engraving! Surely—"

Ben clasped the treasure, gently protective, while the

gallant Washington, erect in the prow of his frail craft and with pointed sword, might yet have been thought to cringe under Addie's jeer. But Ben upheld him before the world. He carefully stowed the picture in the car, then added the final choice bit he had retrieved from a dishonorable limbo—a white china cuspidor, chastely around its top a festoon of forget-me-nots.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NOW the days had come to what Professor Abercrombie called "Autumn's silent revels of decay." The annual adventure of haying was long over and lordly stacks loomed at the center of meadows far and near. Cattle were fat, prices up. Soon would be heard—drunk in by an entranced Ben Carcross—the tireless chorus of white-faced calves being weaned against their will while their mothers, in the first agonies of bereavement, crowded as near as stout fences would permit, hotly voicing antiphonal barytones.

Ben sat at his nearly antique desk in the ranch-house living-room and rejoiced in the year's showing. The Branlock Advertiser, especially since General Pettigrew had begun his major operations in finance, spoke of Ben from week to week as a multimillionaire. All right for that, but first he was a multi-cattleman, whether the money-mad world did or did not regard this as a distinction worthy of print. Idly now, with but mild interest in the beginning, he scanned a half year's accumulation of canceled checks: tokens from a troubled region he had never wished to inhabit and to which, by reason of his masterly guile, no one had yet succeeded in deporting him.

Yet now he dimly felt in these dead slips a tender melancholy, some faded beauty like that of flowers the girls used to press in books, the scent lost, the color dulled, only their outlines preserved with the joy-

ous, confident signatures. "Dead money—but it died happy," thought Ben. And now the old general was foolishly—it seemed to him—bending his splendid talent to the making of still more money instead of stopping to help an uneasy world with its problems. In the old days the general would have been thinking up ways out of that muddle at Geneva or deciding what should be done about Boulder Dam or how to protect thousands of poor people from the Father of Waters at flood. Yet he had fallen to piling up useless money!

The general's checks, especially those of later dates, were rather noteworthy, revealing a steady increase until sums were showing that no mere cattleman had ever written down save under delusions of grandeur. Many were to the order of one Hornblatt, a name in which Ben found a musical suggestion. He contrasted the general's checks with those of Presh, who, still desirous of vainglory in his attire, was at last expressing himself in the West's classiest garage; doing a whale of a business, too, Ben had been astonished to learn. Presh was simply changing the appearance of local highways by adorning them predominantly with one of the best-selling little cars that ever came out of Michigan. The motoring population for miles around had learned in no time—curiously it seemed to Ben—to trade in its old cars for the super-six Luxton.

Ben was impressed, too, by some rather staggering amounts checked over to the St. John Smythes, dating back to those that defrayed the cost of treasures blanded from Hercule's careless friends abroad. Ben couldn't help being impressed by the presumably actual worth of these treasures that Hercule had picked up

for mere songs. And Hercule might be a butterfly, as his mother had so prettily said, but it seemed to Ben—he admitted the base thought with shame—that the lad had somewhere concealed beneath that frivolous exterior a tiny bit of the ant's genius for storing a surplus against the pinch of want.

But what did it matter? The checking account of Lone Tree was immune to any but his own signature, and he felt no concern for the drains on the other. He felt even a little guilty, because from that inexhaustible account he had checked a considerable sum to pay for the new bulls. He might hark back to a lean year when one of those checks for a set of Empire chairs would have made a lot of difference in his social standing at the Second National, but what mattered it now? He encircled the checks with a rubber band and stowed them away in a drawer of his desk with a vague notion that they were treasurable keepsakes—dead embers of the fun Addie and the girls had so long deserved.

He turned to study the flashing souvenir menu of the house-warming banquet presently to dazzle all of Branlock and perhaps some of the outlying districts. It was faced with white satin and surmounted by an engraving of the mansion, under which ran the legend, "Residence of Benjamin P. Carcross." He tried to imagine this elaborate structure as his residence, but with as little success might he have attempted to decode the menu below its title. The leading item was *hors d'œuvres*, which he at first suspected of a faintly ranch flavor. Then he recalled having ordered *hors d'œuvres* out of curiosity at his New York hotel, only to find it a lot of little fixings that they stuck him \$2.50 for.

The remainder of the menu was even less informing until "café" was reached, which he did not need to be told was French for coffee in one of those cheating little cups that they didn't give you sugar and cream with. Still, it was a pretty thing, that menu.

Addie had brightly shown it to him, saying, "Do you sense the wonder of it all?" He did sense it, and wondered if you would have to order from it or whether they would bring the stuff on so you could eat a little of this and a little of that and maybe something else. He couldn't find steak, but they would be sure to have steak there under some foreign name. He'd ought to learn French for "steak" the way he learned it for "beautiful friend." Addie had told him, "Covers will be laid for twenty," giving him a confused impression that the twenty might be going to eat their banquet in bed.

And Addie had been concerned about her invitation list—the cream of Branlock's socially elect for the banquet, with the lower level asked to look in after dinner. Ben was glad to note that Pete Snell had been numbered among the elect. He'd have hated to see Pete drifting in with the culls. He also observed the names of Bill Hepburn and a party he would bring from the city. Bill was all right up to a certain point. Then he had two ways with him. He either got noisy and wanted to show you how easy he could break your arm or how easy he could bite lead pencils into shreds, or he got sentimental and wanted to harmonize in certain old songs with a heart pull. It was a fight or tears with Bill. Addie was taking a chance, Ben considered, but it was her show.

He didn't care to suggest anything after he had firmly stipulated that Whitey should be among the chosen twenty. Since Whitey had degenerated into a mere machinist it had been Addie's idea that he should come to the great house as one of the peasantry, along with the cow hands. But Ben had been firm about Whitey, and Addie, recognizing that new firmness—some unfortunate effect of his ill-advised operation—had gracefully given in, merely citing the need for evening clothes. Ben saw the justice of this and went to the mail-order catalogue with Whitey's measurements.

"The hell!" murmured Whitey when told of the impending honor. "But anything you say, sheriff. I had to go up in one of those suits one time when I was doubling for a guy supposed to be drunk that stole a plane and acted crazy with it on his way to save a gal's fair name. I guess I can wear one standing up." He doubtfully regarded his nails. Tinkering at reapers and the ranch cars had rendered a drastic manicure treatment imperative, and he sought Doyle, who had once operated on a hang-nail for him.

There was a blanch of frost over the fields each morning now; mornings pronounced by the professor to be chill, but not insalubrious. This member of the ranch staff had come on, being, as Ben put it, prime any day for beefing. His garments were no longer more than a little roomy, the desk stoop was noticeably realigned and he would now and then salt his speech with unbookish words. Also he developed a blood lust and went with Art Dugdale to hunt the wild deer, sleeping two nights, after the manner of primitive

savages, on a rubber air mattress. And on the shaggy slope of a distant hill he twice shot with murderous intent at a richly antlered buck. The buck fell after his two shots and one a second later by Art Dugdale, and he glowed with pride when Doyle called him a brute for killing the beautiful animal. The professor was now persuaded that he himself would some day dabble at gentleman farming; though perhaps in a locale of less difficult topography, not too unkemptly timbered.

Others of the staff were coming on. Miss Ellis had not only come far enough to believe she had a flair—she thought that was the word—for the great open spaces, but she was feeling a singular distaste for the careless years wasted in a great city, expecting so little, taunting life to do its worst. She was serious now, trying, in truth, to be as serious as one Burton G. Hemingway, president of the Second National Bank. Of all the contacts she had made, this seemed alone to be momentous. Mr. Hemingway had noticed her at the Bijou Picture Palace when three of the ranch help had taken her into town for an evening's riot. She had become by then just a good pal to those he-boys of the ranch, convinced that there could never be anything serious between her and them.

Crowding out of the Bijou, Mr. Hemingway had greeted her escorts effusively, practically forcing a ceremony of introduction, after which he had suggested refreshment, and provided this at the Sip-and-Bite Grotto with a look in his eyes that Miss Ellis had long since learned to read. Didn't she know when they were stung? Her new contact proving a capable host, a pleasant hour of Branlock's maddest night life was

passed. The host revealed a wanton wish to make it two hours, but at eleven o'clock the three escorts of Miss Ellis began to yawn with practically no finesse, and the party was sunk.

"Fancy my embarrassment," said Miss Ellis to Doyle after telling of these repeated breaches of decorum. "And the man has class—city class—if you know what I mean."

She did her new friend no more than justice. Mr. Hemingway was the only man in Branlock who permitted an edging of white to show from beneath the neck of his waistcoat and he was otherwise caparisoned like a man of the world. Nor was he careless-minded like a cow hand: a man of affairs, of distinguished appearance and mature years, in face and faultless dress carrying more than a suggestion of the fleeting Mr. Melcher who had once dazzled our heroine. He had talked gravely of business conditions in Branlock, conveying to Miss Ellis the flattering presumption that she alone of his listeners would hang upon his words.

She had been pensive with the boys going home, not up-towning them, to be sure; chatty enough to elicit rough estimates of Mr. Hemingway's business rating and the circumstance that he had been lately widowed. Her informants coarsely suggested that Burton G. was again taking notice. This item the young lady properly seemed to ignore. Long and seriously that night she studied her reflection, knowing her glass to reveal no less than one who could at will be united to the stunning Mr. Hemingway in holy wedlock. It was a new future to face. Here was no mere stepper-out who would consider a flask of gin and a few dances suffic-

ing entertainment for a girl born to higher things. A serious note had been sounded.

Once she had thought, but only for an informing afternoon, that the younger Pettigrew had sounded a serious note; he was a jaunty figure and drove an always-new car with a certain winsome diablerie, but she had well known and timely reminded herself that life was not all motoring, and Presh had proved to be exclusively a motorist. "I bet that boy wouldn't have to unbutton his collar to take it off," she confided to Doyle. She had refused in rapid succession six ensuing invitations from Presh to come on and be a good fellow.

But here came something different. She recalled now that in a leisurely drive about Branlock the Hemingway residence had been pointed out to her as something to admire; a mansion itself, back of a spacious lawn set with carefully tended shrubs of exotic appearance. She had remembered that house. Almost anyone would have known it for a banker's house. Miss Ellis had come on.

Doyle, too, had come on, but only within the ordained limits of motherhood. Her baby was brown and rugged with a physical strength, according to the best public opinion, far beyond his ten months. At seven months he had hitched himself along the floor; at eight he had crept. Now he was truly walking, the capable hands at last released from any part in the locomotor functions—at least but for incidental holding to chairs and tables.

Ben Carcross had already advised breaking him early to a lead rope. If Doyle let him go unbroke he'd

soon sear the hands of anybody that put a rope on him. And he was uttering undoubted words—words anyone with an ear could understand. Yet he hadn't been named, being called merely Pudge by friends and intimates. Doyle insisted that she hadn't got around to naming him.

Ben pressed her on this point one day while they watched the budding athlete put himself through some minor gymnastics with appropriate vocal accompaniment.

"You'd ought to name him. The idea of a grown-up brute like that not having any more name than Pudge!" Doyle blushed, a slow-mounting blush that rivaled, at length, her hair. "Go on, give him a name," Ben insisted. Doyle tightened her mouth then held out inviting arms to the child.

"Come here, Pudge," she called. Her child looked up in some annoyance, but came drunkenly by way of two chairs, one full-length fall, and a table. "What's your name?" demanded the woman. This evoked mutilations of several words and a wink which Whitey had lately taught him. The performer had learned that this facial contortion would bring a gratifying reception. There being no applause this time, he winked again and again with no result.

"Tell me your name," the woman commanded.

"Ben," came the weirdly distinct answer, rapidly followed by "Ben-Ben-Ben!" in a breathless staccato.

"I'll be good gosh danged!" This was Mr. Carcross, and the baby winked at him as he stared, twitching his head to make the wink evil and emphatic.

"I named him that a long time ago," admitted Doyle,

still with the burning face. "Only I didn't know if you'd like it."

"Shucks!" muttered Ben, and only his restored tan kept his own blush from becoming public. Outside he noted the good old Veazey horse slouched on three legs, idly wasting good hay that he made scant pretense of wishing to eat. Veazey's owner smiled fondly at the deserving animal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DURING the two weeks succeeding their first encounter, Mr. Hemingway, a business man of methodical habits, had foregone no opportunity to show that his intentions toward Miss Ellis were far from light. He had not only escorted her to the Bijou when the better pictures were showing—certain photoplays he considered to be unwholesome in their influence on the young—but she had dined at his house, correctly chaperoned by her friend Mrs. Doyle—who had cut the evening short from a baseless fear that Portuguese Maria would fall asleep with a half-burned cigarette, incinerating not only herself but someone of importance.

The evening had been decorously spent, Mr. Hemingway pledging his guests in a grape-juice punch untainted by anything alcoholic. Dinner the host enlivened with pithy résumés of late shrewd business coups and an inside history of the B. and J. ditch litigation which had threatened to rend asunder both social and fiscal Branlock. He talked well and steadily, and Miss Ellis tried to seem interested. But Doyle wore a better semblance of attention, because she was listening with a strained look to the cries of her child perishing in the flames.

After dinner Mr. Hemingway had shown Miss Ellis through his house and spoken of the melancholy endured since his bereavement; also of his belief that

the home needed a guiding hand. He had stopped tactfully on this, somewhat to the relief of his guest. He was no raffish pawer or even a premature hand-holder such as Miss Ellis had more than once in her social career been obliged to put right.

She was profoundly impressed. This was serious indeed. And the man really had fine eyes; not a day over thirty-five or perhaps thirty-six, with engaging features and hair still adequate, although perhaps a shade or two off the original tint. Miss Ellis demurely said, "One does, doesn't one?" to Mr. Hemingway's not too pointed assertion that a man missed something, however competently he might be looked after by servants. She saw herself as the guiding hand in this establishment, the fulfilment of a girlish dream that had been hers while yet she toiled uncongenially the half of every twenty-four hours—if lucky with cases. Here was the substance of her dream being delicately proffered. And yet—

Perversely she now felt herself being fed-up with Mr. Hemingway's line. "His talk weighs so gosh-awful much," she confessed to Doyle that night. "Do you guess he ever gets a good laugh out of something?"

This was unjust, because the man laughed heartily after telling how he had, by one clever move, brought the Second National unscathed out of the B. and J. ditch muddle.

It was Burton G. Hemingway who came to the Lone Tree ranch for Miss Ellis on the night of the Carcross housewarming. As he protected her with the rug in his car beautiful, she knew she would be asked to

make a momentous decision. She wished to heck she knew her own mind better. In short, she wished she didn't wish that she might be stepping out with a live one instead of being seriously and distantly respected.

Her escort jested, as they went, about latter-day fortunes that were not accumulated by careful attention to a sound banking or other business; those huge accumulations coming—and often going—as if by magic.

"Carcross is a worthy soul," he observed, "but a child about money."

"He's the salt of the earth," said Miss Ellis, being ill prepared to hear any criticism whatsoever of the gentleman named.

"I should be the last to deny that, little woman"—Miss Ellis had always hated being called "little woman"—"but I am wondering if he has realized to what an extent his father-in-law's operations are involving him. Only yesterday I ventured the liberty of dropping him a hint, but he chose to ignore it. I sincerely trust he doesn't at some near date have a rough awakening. The old general is so childishly optimistic and, of course, we bankers are compelled to be conservative." Mr. Hemingway chuckled wisely.

"One must, must not one?" Miss Ellis replied.

"Capitally put, little woman!" and the speaker ventured a liberty not precisely gross, yet without precedent in their acquaintance: he leaned toward her and approvingly patted a hand.

They were within the outthrust brilliance of lights from the Carcross mansion. Mr. Hemingway parked his car among many others, and slangily said of cer-

tain fortunes as they ascended the steps, "Easy come, easy go!"

And now they entered a scene of splendor not before paralleled in modest Branlock—"Not even in the seven surrounding counties!" as the Branlock Advertiser would put it in its next issue. The editor of this journal was himself present with his wife—Addie knew her onions so far. The newcomers seemed to be about the last of the elect twenty, Miss Ellis having been delayed by readjustments of her new-art wave, secured that afternoon at the Gloriana Beauty Shop.

There were gentlemen in every scheme of dress, from what the visibly uneasy wearers would themselves have called soup and fish, to "a good plain business suit, durn it—and Ben'll think it's all right, whatever Addie says to it. Gosh, I've seen the time he didn't have as good a one." There were ladies whose raiment was kin to the splendors of that waxen houri of the show window, others who had consulted—and profited by—the mail-order catalogues. There was even a conservative or two, of riper years, standing pluckily by their conviction that "a good black silk" was good enough for any party—or any funeral. Plainly, men and women alike found the rooms rather dark colored, and not as lit up as they might have been. There was also, somehow, a sort of shushing suggestion about that receiving group—Addie and Vannie and Gail, Mrs. St. John Smythe and Hercule, all wearing imported clothes, countenances and manners—to which the free spirit of the West reacted with a little added loudness in greeting and subsequent speech.

P. J. Snell, M.D., believed himself to be rescuing

Ben's party from absolute extinction; as Miss Ellis and her escort turned from greeting their hostess and her friends the doc arose from his post near a table in the imperial drawing-room where cocktails were being dispensed, and advanced upon them, a fragile glass in either hand. Miss Ellis cordially accepted one of these.

"I fear it may contain alcohol," suggested Mr. Hemingway, but she was already sipping from the glass.

"What did you think a cocktail has in it?" demanded Doc Snell, his beard and stiff gray hair seeming to bristle with scorn. Miss Ellis continued to sip, receiving, meanwhile, greetings from the dapper Hercule and a glance of significant approval from his mother.

"The party has begun." This was boomed from Bill Hepburn, who had apparently long been stationed by the cocktail table.

"He's the biggest thing you ever saw that wasn't incorporated," Doc Snell told the near-by guests. Mr. Hepburn eased his bulk closer to the table and thrust another cocktail upon Miss Ellis, remarking aloud that a bird couldn't fly with one wing and, in a lower tone, that this was undoubtedly the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Ben appeared with Whitey. Whitey was attired in what is often described in print as "faultless evening dress." Its faults were not remarkable and rapidly became less manifest as cocktails were relayed beyond the crowding guests.

Aloof from the surge, Professor Abercrombie engaged Doyle—effective in pale green—in sedate talk. Bill Hepburn found the moment ripe for song and

begged Doc Snell to blend a tenor with him. The perturbed hostess on the outskirts of the merry group, not without memory of other though far less important occasions on which Mr. Hepburn had been a Carcross guest, reached hastily out and pressed a button.

In almost instant response to the summons a figure appeared in the archway that led to the dining-room. Ben noted that Addie had secured an undoubted butler—a tall, austere person with an almost saturnine face and military precision of bearing. Ben felt proud of Addie. Branlock had never seen a butler like this save in pictures.

On the hush that greeted his appearance, the butler spoke. Without rancor, in the passionless but inexorable tone of one pronouncing sentence on culprits against whom he felt no personal grudge, he said, "Madam is served."

"Shucks!" Bill Hepburn was heard to mutter resentfully. "I bet the cuss is putting that on. He can't be like that in his home circle." And he and Doc Snell continued to press a few last cocktails on the guests who had begun flurriedly to follow Addie into the dining-room, where, finally, the whole party was properly seated.

Addie had Hercule on her right, on her left Professor Abercrombie, who had ventured two cocktails because of the threatening manner of Mr. Hepburn, who brought them to him with no twinkle in his eye. Ben had Mrs. St. John Smythe on his right and Mrs. William Hepburn on his left.

Mrs. Hepburn anxiously watched her husband, beside Miss Ellis and profoundly aware of it. "He's started," she whispered tensely to Ben.

Bill promptly justified her worst fears. With his eyes fixed on the officiating butler, he announced truculently, "Don't fool me for a holy minute—just putting it on."

The startled hush ensuing upon the repetition of this *faux pas* affected even Mr. Hepburn momentarily, and the talk, to Addie's relief, became low-toned, as befits the dining table of cultivated people.

Mr. Hepburn, although slightly grieved, was not long beaten down. He began visibly counting to himself, and it presently appeared that the objects of his count were the shoulder sprays of orchids adorning the lady guests. "Ten bunches of orchids"—he secured the attention of the table by his manner—"all that money wasted! And think of the poor sailors cast away at sea on a raft without even one crust of bread!"

Again there was an uneasy hush, which this time did not depress Mr. Hepburn. In tones he erroneously believed to be secret, he was inviting Miss Ellis to go a-Maying with him. "Just a nice little trip on my private car down to the white lights of New York. And say, little girl, there's a town that will open your beautiful eyes."

"I've heard of it," Miss Ellis replied in a voice of carrying power equal to Mr. Hepburn's. "It must be wonderful there."

"We'll leave the missus," Mr. Hepburn archly promised. "You know, just be a couple of kids together for one glad week."

Said Miss Ellis, aware of shafts both from the wife of her dinner partner and from Mr. Hemingway, "How wonderful of you to think of such a darling plan!" She here caught the eyes of the missus, and

thereafter Mrs. Hepburn lost interest in the darling plan, although Mr. Hemingway, whose eye had not been caught, became distrait.

The president of the Second National had heard of defenseless young girls being dazzled by elderly *roués* and resolved to have a serious talk with this rarely shy blossom at the earliest possible moment; thereby perhaps saving her from a fate he believed she would consider worse than death.

The dinner progressed merrily, with but one shuddering glance of anguish from Addie when Mr. Hepburn began to abandon still-lighted cigarettes on a lace table-spread that had cost in round numbers some twelve hundred dollars. After each of these mishaps a solicitous butler placed another ash tray before the seeming pyromaniac, but, although there were now five of these, Mr. Hepburn's wit steadily prevailed over such petty frustrations.

At a late space between courses Mr. Hemingway arose, coughed in a refined manner and besought attention for a toast he proposed to offer: a toast to old friends and neighbors in whose good fortune they at the moment so felicitously shared. He begged them to drink with him to the continued felicity of that sterling citizen Benjamin P. Carcross and his devoted helpmate who, through years of struggle and grinding privation, had not once faltered in the path of her chosen duty, but had ever been a guide and a consolation in darkest moments, until the dawn of their present felicity. And might he not add, if they would briefly pardon a more serious note— There were graceful tributes to the other members of this family in their felicity

and, having a fluent platform line, it seemed probable that the speaker meant to leave nothing unsaid.

Then Mr. Hepburn happily afforded him a provocation to sit down by bursting into "Sweet Adeline" and brandishing a lately filled champagne glass, local showers from which Miss Ellis, with a lace-edged napkin, began to dry from her pale yellow organdie.

General Pettigrew arose at the conclusion of the vocal solo and responded to the toast with a simple dignity that did not fail him even after Mr. Hepburn had listened as long as he could and again burst into song. This time he was joined by Dr. Snell in what Miss Ellis thought of as a lemon-juice tenor. The current orator drolly gestured helplessness and sat down with some good things unsaid.

The souvenir menus were now passing from hand to hand to be autographed, and there were calls for pencils. Mr. Hemingway signed his name with a faint show of reluctance; a banker's signature was not to be lightly thrown about and, although he possessed a gold pencil chained to himself, he was relieved when the signing of names had to stop by reason of Mr. Hepburn's dental prowess.

Before this guest's plate grew a mound of cedar splinters—relics, having merely a sentimental value—from the wooden pencils that had come his way. He had bitten these to shreds for the general entertainment, arising with each new pencil so that his admirers might freely observe the neatness of his work.

Addie thought it time to suggest coffee in the drawing-room, and the guests were herded there. Addie was still game.

"Dear old Ben, isn't it simply wonderful?" she found time to demand of her husband at this juncture.

"Sure, it's simply wonderful," he told her. "I hope you and the girls are having a good time at our party." He here managed in the doorway a hurried kiss of approval for the flustered hostess.

Something in her joy had raised him above cattle. She was a good girl; she meant all right, and he wanted her to have a lot more fun. He had been a little fussed by Hemingway's speech about struggle and grinding privation. Of course, now and then he had autographed bits of paper for Hemingway at the bank, but he could recall no privations that anyone could say were grinding.

It had been Addie's notion that her guests would sit in the drawing-room over coffee, putting those conversational groupings of the interior decorator to their appointed uses, and after coffee she would show them through the house amid cries of delight and amazement. But some of the conversational groupings were at once noisy, and no wish to be shown art treasures of paneled oak and Chippendale could be discovered. She was glad when the music came, and those lesser people outside of Branlock's supreme twenty.

Bill Hepburn had formed a conversational grouping wholly by himself and was telling the world that he was probably a bigger oil man than any other present, also that he could break the human arm by a simple jerk of one hand taught him by a Japanese gardener who had learned it directly from his country's ruler. Mr. Hepburn begged for arms upon which

to demonstrate his skill, but dancing intervened to divert him.

Mr. Hemingway had hovered protectively about the defenseless Miss Ellis, meaning to save her from the wiles of a drunken debauchee, but he lost this shy blossom when her boy friends from the ranch began to drift in. Miss Ellis was not one to uptown friends who might not be in evening dress; she rather shortly conveyed this to Mr. Hemingway as she left him with Mr. Carcross to see that the boys had a square deal in the dining-room. In this attractive apartment the capable butler now supervised the plotting of what a Branlock Advertiser would later describe as "*A recherché* buffet supper with all the trimmings." Graciously in view on the sumptuous sideboard were bottles, a silver bowl of ice, and siphons in silver sheaths.

Miss Ellis, as she put it, "bought" all the boys drinks and danced with each.

"Democrat!" Mr. Hemingway, who did not care for the modern dances, fondly jeered as she passed him in the arms of a Lone Tree top rider.

"Not on your life!" she denied. "Our family has always been Republican." She didn't see why politics should be brought up just now.

Ben lingered by the sideboard to make sure that his employees should not be unduly impressed by its elegance, also because none of the conversational groupings in the drawing-room had attracted him. At one moment when sideboard custom was in abeyance, he looked into the other apartment to discover that Professor Abercrombie was entertaining one delighted group with an anecdote about a cat and a rabbit. He:

waited for the outburst of laughter, led by Gail and Vannie, and observed Whitey, apparently congealed in a sinister fascination, at the edge of the group. He saw Addie drawn by the merriment and saw Gail persuade the anecdotist, with no marked difficulty, to tell it all again. Whitey remained a frigid column of awe during the repetition.

Again at his sideboard hospitalities, Ben was chatting with one Butch Kendrick, a former employee now precariously on his own with a dry ranch. Ben was wishing luck to the venture, and Butch was looking hopeful, when Miss Ellis carelessly entered the dining-room to secure a drink which her late partner had confessed he was too bashful to go personally for because he had already taken three. Miss Ellis was being a good pal. Half-way to the sideboard where the two men held speech she was halted by a view of Ben's companion; a blinding view that also froze her, even as Whitey had been frozen, in a fascination that might or might not be sinister.

Butch Kendrick was toweringly tall, with a head of waving yellow hair and flashing blue eyes that shone from what Miss Ellis had learned was one of those strong silent faces. He was smiling at Ben, and the smile was another whitely flashing revelation.

For Miss Ellis the housewarming ceased. A moment she stood, stricken, then, with eyes in a still helpless stare, but with a partial recovery of her native wit, she approached the sideboard and nervously begged Mr. Carcross for a glass of water. She trembled in the ecstasy of her moment.

Mr. Carcross carelessly asked her to shake hands with his friend Butch Kendrick. Mr. Kendrick, who

had not hitherto viewed Miss Ellis, seemed himself instantly to become paralyzed as their eyes clinched. Then hands were limply shaken, Mr. Kendrick saying huskily, "Pleased to make your acquaintance." Miss Ellis could awkwardly achieve but a wordless murmur far beneath her society manner.

Mr. Carcross, all unaware of any great moment, turned away to assure Pete Snell that he had come to the right saloon for what he might be needing. Coming back, the genial host found that Miss Ellis and her new acquaintance were gone. He looked farther and saw them to be walking stiffly toward the door, neither betraying awareness of the other, yet suggesting somehow that they were welded.

Past the harmonies of the dancing room they went, and Miss Ellis dimly apprehended the tolerantly smiling visage—a curiously blurred visage—of a middle-aged gentleman whose name, she seemed to recall, was Hathaway or something like it. She wondered why the man was grinning at her in that silly way. The pair walked like cunningly fashioned automatons, oblivious to salutes from the mere pleasure-seekers they passed, and reached presently the quiet library, where they sat stiffly in two stiff chairs not especially meant as a conversational grouping.

They sat and stared at each other. Following a long moment of this they returned uneasily and with partial sanity to a world they had ages ago quitted. They gazed now with gleams of intelligence in their eyes, though there was as yet but scant speech.

"It's awful quiet in here." This was Mr. Kendrick being chatty.

"Isn't it?" weakly replied Miss Ellis, wondering

what his name was. She put hands to her burning cheeks, and her escort politely told her he would fetch something refreshing. During his absence she stared without flinching at the portrait of General Pettigrew, then took one of two fragile glasses from the returning escort. Thirstily she drank and was alarmed to find the drink so heady.

"Why, it's made me drunk!" The confession had none of that verbal lacework she normally achieved without difficulty.

"That can't make you drunk; that's only from the lemonade bowl," said her escort.

"Something's gone to my head," she told him. "My hands are so hot."

They left the chairs for the divan, from which a better view might have been had of the portrait of a distinguished publicist and educator; though this was a privilege neither chose to enjoy. Seated there, Miss Ellis found her hands insensibly edging toward the hands of Mr. Kendrick, which presently enveloped them.

They sat thus a long time, again staring. Miss Ellis at length drew a long breath, blinked her remarkable eyes as might one coming from under a spell, and distinctly said, "Well, I'll be darned!"

Mr. Kendrick put a slow flashing smile upon her and muttered, "You and me both, Miss—"

She uttered her name and demanded his. Their hands were still blindly involved.

"Say we dance," suggested Mr. Kendrick. So they danced. In their belief they were alone on the floor, and in the belief of Miss Ellis she was dancing for

the first time in her long life. She greeted Mr. Hathaway, or whoever he was, very cordially when the dance was done, and detected a slant of bewilderment in his rather good eyes as, clutching the arm of her escort, she led him again to the quieting hush of the library.

Now they talked while Miss Ellis vainly sought to take stock of what had happened to her. "Get organized!" she told herself, and during this process she discovered that what had happened to her was apparently one cowboy—but such a cowboy! She acquired his unexciting life history in no time at all, secretly wondering how the film people had so long overlooked him. She saw him "batching it," as he said, in a shack out in the lonely hills with his few head of stock as a start, because he hadn't wanted to work all his life for someone else the way most fool buckaroos did. It was a rough shack, yet, as he described it, Miss Ellis strangely beheld herself adjusting chintz curtains at the windows. Their hands again seemed to be inextricably blended.

"Well, I'll be darned," Miss Ellis once more said.

"You and me both," responded the escort. Again they asked to be told each other's names. After this she called him Butch, though knowing his given name to be Harold, and he called her "You."

Outside, mad revelry was forward, yet it was nothing anyone would wish to bring into the quiet atmosphere of a library in which a portrait of General Pettigrew was dominant. Once Mr. Hemingway paused at the door to favor them with an uneasily prying glance.

Observing him, Miss Ellis mentally issued a pithy command: "Mesh your gears, Waldo!" She remembered the gentleman now. Aloud she said to Mr. Kendrick, "It's the weirdest thing. You won't believe it, but it seems just as if I had known you in another life or something. I guess nobody could explain that."

"It's strange, all right," Mr. Kendrick confirmed with awe in his tone. "You may think I'm a liar, but that's the identical thing I was thinking about you."

"Fate!" thought Miss Ellis, and, again still to herself, "Now it's really happened to me." Millenniums flashed by before they were disturbed by their hostess, who brought in some common guests to rave about poppa's oil portrait, painted by an artist chap in Paris. The disturbed pair sauntered toward the door.

"Let's get out of this," whispered Mr. Kendrick, with a glance of disrelish at his surroundings. "I got a car."

"Let's," agreed Miss Ellis. "I'm so tired of society."

"Who did you come with?"

Miss Ellis hesitated. "Oh, I sort of happened to come with a Mr. Hemingway."

"Gee! You must be somebody. You're traveling high, with that bird." He bent upon her a look of suddenly distant respect that she noted with alarm.

"But there's nothing between us—just a couple of good pals," she announced hastily. "He's really a nice old dear. Listen, I'll slip up and get my coat, and we can do a fade-away out a side door—in five minutes."

She slunk up a minor staircase, and Mr. Kendrick took a look-see through the merry rooms below. The serious drinkers under the leadership of Messrs. Hep-

burn and Snell were now gathered in the kitchen, where they harmonized. Ben Carcross lingered by the sideboard trying to keep Addie's party from getting rough. Bill Hepburn had already sobbed on his shoulder over the discovery that his friend was just a bird in a gilded cage.

Outside, Miss Ellis was swept into resolute arms and deposited in perhaps the oldest motorcar still going—a car that should even then have been advertising itself and its makers in a show window. It shivered abjectly at the initial agitation of its venerable engine, trembling pitifully with protest when put under way. These details went unnoted by Miss Ellis, who would have taken oath in any court that she rode in a smoothly running sedan of the latest classy model. "From riches to rags" was a reflection yet to flaw the serenity of her mind even for an absurd moment.

They seemed to go where the car listed, through streets of darkened houses, then out where applauding stars lighted a world new to Miss Ellis. "Well, I'll be darned," she murmured, remembering that these might be the same stars hanging at that instant above Greater New York.

She shivered at the thought, and her escort made his car to quit profaning the night with the clamor of machinery disintegrating. He then rummaged out a blanket to reenforce the wrap of his passenger. The blanket, obviously enough, had lately garmented a horse, a hard working horse, the crime analyst could have deduced—yet to the enchanted senses of Miss Ellis it might have been imbued with the rarer perfumes of Araby.

Mr. Kendrick's car, at rest, was as quiet as any car ever made, and they sat in peace while telling each other all about how strange it was and how they could not yet believe it. Love is wonderful, they said, and repeated the truism many times. They tried vainly to convey what each had felt at that first curiously freezing moment. But what was the use? They were helpless with each other.

When the first hints of dawn flashed above some wonderful hills, the Carcross motor passed the empty car of Butch Kendrick where it had died an apparently ignominious death by the roadside a mile from the Lone Tree gates. Some distance ahead two figures hand in hand trudged up the road straight into the eye of day. Whitey stopped when these were overtaken.

"You folks come in here?" he invited.

Mr. Carcross added, "It's a wonder that cockroach of yours got even this far," and opened a door for the overtaken ones. The pair turned upon the occupants of the sound car eyes showing no light of reason.

"We'd rather walk," they both said. The motorists looked out upon them with amazement.

"Mr. Hemingway waited a long time for you," Doyle called. "He was worried about you."

"Who?" demanded Miss Ellis.

"Mr. Hemingway," Doyle returned with careful enunciation.

"Oh, him," said Miss Ellis, and nothing more.

The Carcross motor hurried on, and Doyle looked back. The pair again trudged forward into the new light. "Did you notice the condition of that girl's slippers?" Doyle asked.

No one had, but then neither had the girl herself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*W*HILE dawn spread over Lone Tree, Ben and Whitey drank coffee in the living-room. Whitey asked for instructions about his evening clothes, it being his conviction that these would not again be required. Ben advised storing them. Nowadays you couldn't tell what the cattle business might need.

To them presently came Miss Ellis out of the dawn. She was starry-eyed and marched on air to Ben as he sat. Gathering his shoulders into a close embrace, she feverishly pressed her lips to his, drew herself up, burst into tears and fled from the room.

It was behavior that would not have surprised the St. John Smythes, but it left Ben aghast until he glanced out of the window to note Butch Kendrick on his way to the bunk-house.

"Stepping high," he described Butch's gait. "Funny how it takes 'em," he said. "One minute she has Hemingway, the best match in the whole county, eating out of her hand, and the next she falls for a buckaroo that has to count the letters in his name every time he writes it."

"Dames are queer," Whitey professed to have discovered.

A door opened, and Professor Abercrombie came, in pajamas and bathrobe, for sociable coffee. "Your Mr. Hepburn is truly a type," he told Ben.

"That's one way to say what he is," Ben replied.

He had last seen Mr. Hepburn immovably asleep on Addie's Renaissance day bed, whither he had crept to be away from it all.

"One of your big oil men, so he informed me."

"There ain't any big oil men," said Ben. "There's only men that big oil happened to. Bill Hepburn was a big brakeman on a fast freight. He got in a poker game on one of his lay-overs and won sixty dollars. He took the loser's cow in payment and then had to get a pasture for the cow. They struck oil in the pasture. That's how Bill got to be a big oil man. Anyone can if it happens." He wanted to add: "But it takes brains to be a cowman."

"That is almost droll," was the professor's comment. "And this chap is so racy of speech. One phrase he used—it was about your lavish entertainment—he remarked that you must have spent money like—like an 'intoxicated seaman,' I think it was—something racy from the rural vulgate."

His listeners were apparently bewildered by the simile, but the professor could do no more for them. "I am positive I have the chap's wording of it," he insisted. "Of course, it's a bit of slang. And I must tell you, Carcross, that your father-in-law is a more vital person than I had suspected; a very forceful personality. He led me to his study for a chat last night and gave me the details of an enterprise he had in hand for a world-shaking photodrama, educational and patriotic in its intention. I was quite warmed by his enthusiasm. With expert assistance he has for months been producing a splendid epic of the air—powerful propaganda against the hideous specter of war, yet

rich with drama that must appeal to the pedestrian mind. The completed picture, he assures me, will not only tend to make the world warless but will net a handsome revenue—a gripping drama of the clouds.”

“What’s that?” demanded Whitey with sudden interest.

“A gripping drama of the clouds—the very phrase General Pettigrew employed. Rather colorful, that.”

“What’s the name of the company?” demanded Whitey.

“I forget that, if I was told, but the genius who conceived this epic is named Hornblatt—I marked the somewhat unusual name.”

“Oh!” said Whitey, and seemed to lose interest in the epic.

The professor finished his coffee and excused himself. “My unwonted dissipation—” he explained. “It’s quite a novel experience, this subversion of time; to be retiring as the world arises.”

“Time ain’t anything but how you measure something,” asserted Whitey. “That Jew friend of yours is just a crackpot.”

“Apple-sauce!” retorted the professor with a cunning laugh. “*Desipere in loco*,” he added. “Meaning ‘to indulge in trifling at the proper time.’” He left them with another laugh.

“A gripping drama of the clouds,” muttered Whitey. “And little Jake Hornblatt,” he meditatively added.

“That house was sure warmed aplenty,” said Ben.

“Not a cold room in it when I left,” Whitey agreed.

“But that ain’t all of it. The next house-warming you’ll need that party suit for will be held in France.”

"Somewhere in France," echoed Whitey. "How come, sheriff?"

Ben told him how come. Addie and the girls, at a pause in the Hepburn activities, had told him of their latest inspiration. No longer did they yearn for an eastern home, but for a château in sunny France. Hercule knew the darlinest château, so old and romantic, with a moat and ivied towers and dungeon keeps; rich in historical associations—scene of more than one important murder. And not too far from Paris. Wasn't it a heavenly opportunity? It was now the property of an old family friend of Hercule's, a Count Somebody, who would let it go to Hercule or to a purchaser approved by Hercule—the count naturally wished his château to be occupied by people of the right sort and Hercule would still have to convince him that his American friends were quite all of that, and Hercule thought he could—but, anyway, the count would let this adorable château go at a ruinous sacrifice because in the north of France he suffered from a distressing bronchial affection. And this château would be such a darling *pied-à-terre*. Addie and both girls had familiarly chirped *pied-à-terre*.

"That's French for a place to put your feet," explained Ben.

"Sure," said Whitey. "And we lived three nights in one of those ruined châteaux. The guy that ruined this one done a classy job."

"This ain't ruined only on the outside," Ben explained. "And Hercule can pick it up for a song."

Whitey had listened to talk about Hercule. "That lad ought to be in the opera," he submitted.

"He certainly keeps up his music," said Ben. "Here I was thinking he had sung all the songs he knew." Yet Ben was pleased by this new inspiration. From somewhere in France it would not be easy to interfere with the proper running of a cattle ranch.

They both yawned. "Maybe I can tell you something about that gripping drama of the clouds," Whitey began. Ben yawned once more, then with lazy shoulders and brooding eyes he stared from the window.

"Look at that worthless old skate out there wasting hay at this hour of the morning. I'll bet he has the other horses call him early, so he can get on the job."

"I know all about this little Jake Hornblatt," persisted Whitey.

"I certainly got to put a bee on Art Dugdale about those feed racks. I've told him often enough. They let a horse pull out hay and stomp it into the mud. You'd think hay was something Santa Claus brought us. Well, let's do half an hour's sleep." With marked irritation he went to reverse the broom leaning by the mantel. "How many times I got to tell this help?" he complained.

When Ben had gone, Whitey waited only long enough to replace the broom at its ruinous stance. He had early formed this habit and would watch the broom with a face blank of all but sympathy when the little storm came. He went to his own bed in troubled thought about what Jake Hornblatt might be doing to the Carcross bank roll. So old Jinglebob Pettigrew was the blithering angel?

One by one sleep-ridden cow hands, lately care-free in the dance, emerged from the bunk-house, stood an

unhappy moment at its portal to yawn at the rising sun, then stumble off to a hurried breakfast and loathsome toil. More than one of them affirmed at this crisis that a buckaroo's life wasn't any life for a white man. You never got your sleep out. And more than one went out to address his mount with profane irritation while saddles were being cinched. Practically all of the string proved to be in a bad temper that morning and were cordially urged to start something if they thought for a minute they could get away with it.

The ranch-house stayed unalive until a late hour of the morning, when Miss Ellis appeared. Though not disheveled, she had not been as painstaking as usual about her ensemble. The new-art wave looked old, and her lips were unstained. But her remarkable eyes were luminous with young magic.

She went softly from the sleeping house out to the ranch gate to hang there in some eye-narrowing calculation. A mile down the road reposed the object of her tender but slightly deprecating regard. Stark in the full sun, it was, even at a mile, a battered ruin of a car slouching unbeautifully, shamelessly exposing the ravages of senile decay.

That morning when she and her man had been so smartly passed by the important Carcross motor, its owner had called back to them with untimely joviality, "Leave it right there and we'll plant some pretty vines to run over it." She had seen Butch Kendrick flinch under this coarse sally, a spasm of pain compressing his lips. Some people thought they were so smart. Miss Ellis was going to see about that.

She turned from a view admittedly repulsive and

made her way to the bunk-house, where she tapped at the door. Getting no answer, she pushed into a bleak room of confusion and stuffy disorder relieved only—but how gloriously relieved!—by the inert form of Butch Kendrick blanketed in one of the bunks. With a guest's privilege, Butch was getting his sleep like a white man. Miss Ellis looked down upon him sleeping with little short breaths, a shirted arm flung out; the blue eyes were hidden, but a fringe of dark lashes—the longest lashes, surely, God ever gave to man—were exposed, and all the yellow hair tumbled to view. The eyes of Miss Ellis grew yet more luminous. She bent as if to touch the undulating hair, but straightened and went noiselessly out, reflecting that she must make Butch some pajamas. The night apparel of cowboys seemed not to be styled for comfort and was, in truth, too little unlike the semi-dress of day.

With purposeful stride, her eyes not less luminous, yet again narrowed with an effect of calculation not usual in one so young, she went to the telephone. The younger Pettigrew was shrilly jerked from needed sleep by a bell which he at first conceived to be one of the instruments in an orchestra. Continued peals brought him to a better understanding of the disturbance and with some impatience he lifted a telephone receiver to one of his outstanding ears. The cross look gave way to another. The voice of Miss Ellis came; a sweetened voice, almost cooing, beseeching the immediate presence of the listener.

Presh hastily dressed. Half an hour later, when he flourishingly arrived, Miss Ellis, restored to her wonted finish of attire and coiffure, seemed to be in light talk

with a recently awakened Whitey. She descended to the basest coquetry in her greeting, and Presh was delighted to learn that the little gal wished to buy one of his cars. He dashed into his selling talk, but was shut off. Miss Ellis wished to trade in her old car—a little present from one of her boy friends. It was a good car, but she wished a shinier one for town use, and how much would Presh allow her on the turn-in—wasn't that what he called it?

Presh called it that. The eyes of Miss Ellis again narrowed, though so slightly that Presh saw only the lighted wonder of them.

"You see, I left my car down the road there this morning because I wanted to walk in the heavenly morning air, but you take us down to it now and tell me how much you'll allow poor little me. . . . Whitey—Mr. Petty—will tell you it's a perfectly good car, so you needn't look stern when you see it."

Presh drove them to the wreck. Not more than a gentleman might did he betray consternation when he saw it.

"Of course, it's a used car," Miss Ellis said.

"I see, I see," Presh nobly replied.

"But Whitey—I mean Mr. Petty here—says the engine might be as good as the day it came out of the shop." Whitey's eyes barely flicked Miss Ellis and came to rest on a distant peak.

"It's some little bus," he distinctly said.

"Of course, I'm awful dumb about business matters, but how many dollars will you give me credit for on one of your stunning cars?" queried the customer with a melting glance.

Presh affected a judicial scrutiny of the wreck, walking about it with almost a frown. "Well, let me see, now. Oh, I guess I could allow you not more than three or four hundred dollars." Whitey's eyes sought another and farther peak flashing in the high sun.

"Four hundred dollars," said Miss Ellis. "That doesn't seem much, but I suppose I couldn't do any better. Whitey—I mean Mr. Petty—said I couldn't hardly expect more than that." Whitey shivered slightly under the burning rays of a noon sun, though his eyes still clung to the distant peak.

"Say we run it up to the ranch," said Presh.

Miss Ellis demurred. "No; I'm so anxious to have the new car—to 'close up the deal.' Isn't that what you call it?"

Presh said that was what they called it, and Miss Ellis said she trusted him fully and wouldn't try for a better bargain with his trade rivals. She felt sure she could be making no mistake in putting her tiny savings into a Luxton roadster. She and Whitey would walk back to the ranch, so Presh could hurry out with the new car.

Presh was off at an unlawful speed, and Whitey spoke once as they walked: "So that's how the cuss is doing so much business with his new cars?"

"I don't understand you," said Miss Ellis curtly. This was the first car she had bought in her whole life.

One hour later the new roadster glistened at the ranch-house gate. "I'll send out for the old one this afternoon," said Presh. "And say, how about throwing a rough little party this eve?"

"Tonight?" Miss Ellis pondered distractingly. "Let

me think." She appeared brightly to think. "I'll tell you, I'm not sure now, but I'll give you a ring later."

Presh was off, and Miss Ellis went to sit on the bunk-house steps. When the yawning Butch Kendrick emerged she for a moment filled his blue eyes to overflowing. Then he was led to the Luxton.

"It's ours," said Miss Ellis. "I mean it's my first present to you."

Butch widened his eyes, removed his Chugwater hat and rumbled his corn-colored hair with a palsied hand. This was of course part of that crazy dream he thought he had awakened from just now. Dreams were sure funny. You thought you were awake and pretty soon you'd find yourself at a party without your pants on, or something terrible. He cautiously managed a survey of his lower person.

"Says how?" he asked as one groping through a miasma of sleep. He timidly touched a gleaming fender, and the metal did not yield. He then glanced about a remembered barn lot. Old Veazey pawed wastefully at hay. It seemed right, but this creature at his side still babbled dream stuff.

"It yours—ours. I hadn't spent a cent in six months. You ought to get a peek at my bank book."

This bordered on sanity. Butch made other contacts with the gift, reaching in to try the hand brake. Maybe he was awake. But the creature spoiled it again.

"You see, I turned in your old car. For four hundred dollars."

"Four hundred what?"

"Dollars. He said three or four hundred and I said four hundred right after that; and he's been kind of a boy friend of mine—just a good pal, you know."

Said Butch Kendrick: "Over a year ago I bought that object from Curt Manning for twenty dollars cash and one killing hog, and at that I was gypped."

"I wanted to give you a present and you needed a better car. Anyway, I'd have only spent the money recklessly."

Butch replaced his hat and made a cigarette, and it proved to be real. That was a good test. You never got a real smoke in one of those dreams.

"Let's try it out," suggested the buyer.

So they did this, and the car moved like a car, not mounting the viewless air and flying over the barn or becoming, under the driver, a cayuse with a hump in his back, or a spread tarp on which dice were being thrown to the jingle of silver. It did none of the things Butch had been prepared for. They sped by the ruin of a former car, but neither of them spared this so much as a side glance.

By then they were prying into each other's past. Butch explained that his trouble was, he had always been too choosy.

"Nothing like you ever happened to me," he said.

Miss Ellis was saying that, of course, she couldn't deny having had girlish infatuations, but the objects of these had invariably proved to be simply no matter—mere puffs. And that old Mr. Hemingway—just a fallen arch.

They returned when the huge red disk of a harvest moon was majestically lifting above the low eastern horizon. The Luxton was halted while they favored this cosmic feat with their notice.

"It always looks so flat and thin," observed Butch Kendrick.

"It looks like a record," said Miss Ellis. And then :
"It's our own wonderful record and we'll always play
it over and over and over."

"I got a couple of good killing hogs left for the
winter," replied her man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A PLACID day followed, with Lone Tree come again to its routine, save that Miss Ellis now wandered about in a gentle madness of pity. She had begun by pitying poor Doyle—to whom nothing had happened—then great-heartedly had gone on to pity her luckless sisters the wide world over. None of them could have Butch Kendrick, who had yellow hair and kept still a lot.

She had listened to old Mr. Carcross tell of Butch's innocent ignorance of banking methods. Butch had received back pay of eight hundred dollars for work on Lone Tree and had deposited this in the Second National, receiving the formal courtesy of a couple of check-books. He had rented a safe-deposit box in which to store these, explaining to Ben that his shack was often left unguarded; people could break in and steal his check-books.

Miss Ellis had seen nothing laughable in this. Huh, check books! Old Mr. Hemingway knew all about check books—but what else? As she seemed on the point of reviling Mr. Hemingway for knowing something Butch had never needed to learn, Mr. Carcross had mollified her with the assurance that Butch was a buckaroo in a million. Miss Ellis accepted this banality and continued to pity her sisters who could never contact Butch.

Whitey this same day had shown a face marred by

thoughtfulness. He had driven Ben to the lately warmed Branlock house, then gone to the classy garage where Presh was revealing the wizardry of salesmanship, and spent a pleasant hour in shop talk with the proprietor. Whitey had been still thoughtful as he returned Ben to the ranch and listened with but half an ear to Ben's disclosure that the house hadn't been really warmed when they thought it had.

Bill Hepburn had lighted the last fire. Aroused ungently from his sleep on a lady's day bed, he had behaved like a snake in the grass, and the mansion was without a butler. Refreshed by his sleep, Bill had gone to the lovely kitchen to find the capable butler serving refreshments to Doc Snell and Curly Hatton, also condescendingly to himself. His military bearing had appreciably relaxed; he was showing himself to be a man among men, winsomely minded to meet anyone half-way. Mr. Hepburn found them at a vocal moment and, while his acute sense of pitch had been shocked by certain inaccuracies, he had detected in the butler a tenor of unusual merit. Above Bill's shuddering bass and under his stern leadership he had brought something pretty good from the bunch; though finding Mr. Hatton less hospitable to suggestion than he could have wished.

At Bill's command the butler had then rendered a tenor solo beginning "Deep in my heart—," Bill threatening to break the arm of any gentleman present who didn't want to hear the butler sing alone just for once. Bill was then convinced that he had made a find, like those guys in Italy that discover valuable paintings behind cheap frescoes. After this he directed more

harmonizing, liking the butler's tenor better than ever and comparing it to the tenor of Doc Snell in terms not ideally tactful.

There were more drinks and the butler further endeared himself by another solo. Bill had then offered him a substantial increase over his present wage, with an abundance of leisure for the employment of his gift in song.

The butler had instantly accepted and the four were rendering "For he's a jolly good fellow," with perhaps needless repetitions, when their hostess intruded upon them. They were all, including the butler, who burst into tears at the news, astonished to learn that the hour was eleven A.M. They had believed, and so assured the lady, that her party was just beginning.

Secluding herself with the still sobbing butler for a moment, Mrs. Carcross had discharged him with a few burning words, whereupon he regained enough of his native dignity to tell her of his new post. It was then that Mrs. Carcross discovered Mr. Hepburn to be a snake in the grass instead of the merely rough-house guest she had trustingly supposed him to be.

"And that's that," said Ben. "Somehow that butler didn't look to me like one that would stick. The girls say his lower nature was to blame." Then, noting that Whitey had seemed to be inattentive to his gossip, he demanded, "What's on your mind?"

Whitey protested that nothing but his cap was on his mind. But the following day, at a sunny moment in the ruined armchairs out before the ranch-house door, he admitted there had been something on his mind, and it was still there and could he got it off?

"Shoot!" directed Ben.

"It's like this, sheriff: I didn't want to be butting in, but I thought all night about it, and you been swell to me, and so forth. First, it's this kid brother-in-law of yours. On the level, sheriff, is he dull in the intellect?"

"You know he is," Ben replied. "But look at the business he's doing."

"I already looked at it yesterday. I took a long look."

"Well, ain't he selling a lot of those cars?"

"Sure he is. And do you know how? I got wise when this Ellis gal talked him out of four hundred dollars for that pile of junk down the road. He says he can't allow more than 'three or four' hundred for it. Some close figuring, huh? Anyway, I get my suspicions, so I drop in and chin with him and look over the cars he's been taking for new ones. And who wouldn't trade in their old cars if this boy will give a man two or three times what it's worth? I'm telling you honest, sheriff. He's got about fifty cars there that will make a swell wrecking dump; not a one worth half what he allowed for it. That's why he's done business—and I hope you don't think I'm butting in to wise you."

"Of course, I don't. I often wondered how come Presh was all at once the king of car-sellers. Still, he's having his fun."

"Maybe you could set him up in some business where people don't turn in old stuff. Say one of these places—Snappy Togs for the Snappy Dresser. People don't turn in their old neckties or 1925 model undershirts. He'd be getting, maybe, an even break."

"Maybe." Ben doubtfully considered. "Still, you don't know that boy. He'd find some new way to gyp himself."

"And there's another thing I might as well get off my mind," Whitey went on. "It's this grand, gripping cloud picture your old boy is putting up for. I don't know how far in he's gone—"

"Pretty far," said Ben, remembering some of the general's canceled checks.

"Burny-burny hands!" Whitey warned. "And don't ever try to hold your breath till he gets the money back. That epic drama is just a gipsy curse. It's the same one dropped me out of the clouds. And your old boy is liable to drop farther."

"The same one you dropped out of?" Ben felt a friendly interest in the epic.

"Right in one of the first scenes. Of course, I don't say that fall of mine will be the only good one in it. This little Hornblatt is a nut. He believes in the picture. I bet he'd put his own money into it if he had any. And other people's money is like the dirt under his feet to him. It's a good picture all right, full of education and love-your-native-land and no-more-war and all that blah. But you'd be surprised how a picture can eat up money—planes and fliers, studios and stars. Money melts like snow in the bad place. To Jake Hornblatt a million is birdseed."

"But how about all the money they're going to get in for this picture? You talk like people won't pay to see it."

Whitey became impressive: "About three years too late. This is a silent picture, and the talkies are getting

the money. I bet today Hornblatt couldn't hock all he's made of this picture for one French franc."

Ben placidly regarded as much of safe Lone Tree as could be observed from his chair. It, too, was a fairly silent picture, but a good one. "Too bad," he said. "The general will feel hurt. He's been all hipped up about putting over something big."

"Little Jake Hornblatt can hip anybody. The first angel he had for this picture dropped his roll in a single month that didn't have but twenty-eight days in it."

"I always thought the general was a wise old trout," said Ben. "But maybe it's only things at Washington and the Peace Conference and such that he's wise about. Maybe they greened him in this picture."

"Understand, Jake Hornblatt never greened anybody but himself. He's just an earnest guy that believes everything he says. And he didn't figure on talkies."

Talkies? Ben was wishing the general might have furnished speech as well as capital for his picture. He believed that the general, if let go, could talk any picture to a profit.

"I thought you might drop a word to the old boy when he's throwing good money after bad," suggested Whitey.

"I couldn't hurt his feelings. Besides, it's the family money, the general's as much as anyone's, and if he wants to act like—like a—"

"Like an intoxicated seaman," Whitey prompted, bending a thumb toward the professor, who, near by, was reading a hard book.

"He had some fun coming to him," insisted Ben. He pictured the general at Napoleon's desk, using Napo-

leon's desk set for his fun. "He seemed to think especially well of his man Hornblatt, because he has an office in the First National Bank building."

"It's a large building," Whitey pointed out. "And say, sheriff, maybe you could get him to take up stamp-collecting or something not so chancy. Anyway, he's all out of step in the picture business."

Deaf to his amiable suggestions, Ben was thinking, "Money that comes in a bunch is a lot of loco weed, and some folks eat it and go hay-wire." He thought of the château that Hercule, with a song, would charm from Count Somebody with a throat affection; of Presh being an all-the-year-round Santa Claus, chucking a new car into anyone's sock any day; of the general lavishly dealing out Carcross money to save the world from war. "All locoed," he decided.

"Say," demanded Whitey after a long silence, "what's the old boy general of?"

Ben squirmed. "I don't rightly know; nothing maybe. I began calling him that the first time I saw him, and other folks got the habit. Don't he look like a general? Anyway, he's a very forceful personality."

"Yeah," agreed Whitey, but with no burning conviction.

Ben arose from the sagging armchair. "I'll run in for a little talk with the old boy. Maybe I can drop a hint about this sky epic."

He drove thoughtfully into Branlock. Being alone, with no one to whom he must point out the more thrilling objects of interest, he drove sanely. He tried to think of some tactful warning for the general, but his mind would persist in trying to mesh with Addie's

mind. If she had fired the butler, how did she figure Bill Hepburn was a snake in the grass for giving the poor cuss a new job? He'd bet even the professor couldn't figure that. It was a problem still fascinating him when he found the general in the library confronting, with stern approval, his own portrait.

The general removed a hand from his hip—where the portrait had it—and drew Ben up to his study. There he toyed with items of the Corsican's desk set while he told Ben about the gripping drama of the clouds. To further this enterprise he had realized on other investments—disappointingly, on some of them, he admitted—and his eggs were now in one basket. He quoted stupendous sums realized from other pictures and glowingly estimated for Ben the still greater sums bound to accrue from this greater picture.

"My associate, Mr. Jacob Hornblatt, assures me that we shall presently begin to 'clean up,' as the trade phrase has it. A profit of three millions, he assures me, is a conservative estimate."

Ben lost heart. He couldn't strike the old boy in the face.

"But don't think, Ben, that I have put our money into this merely to make more money. No matter what we may say about money, it is usually desirable, and—"

"I never talked any other way about money," Ben ventured. The general waved aside this pleasantry.

"Our real object is educational. We have a picture that will enrich the common mind—the mind of the man in the street—"

As he talked, with eyes aglow, Ben saw a multitude of men in a street rushing to the picture, to come from

it better men in a better street. This was no time to discourage the general. Let the old boy dream on if it proved to be a dream. He ventured once to ask if the epic would be a talking epic. The picture would be silent, the general almost sternly told him. None of those voices purporting to issue from shadows, but sounding as if they came from the depths of a cistern or, at best, from a barrel.

Ben began to feel that Whitey had been spoiled for the epic by reason of his accident. It would be a great picture for this man in the street, whoever he was, and would place the family—the general once more employed the picturesque phrase—"beyond the reach of want." Whitey couldn't know everything about pictures. In a flush of freshened admiration for a forceful personality, he gripped the general's hand at parting.

Downstairs he consented to drink tea with Addie and the girls, though the tea was not man tea. The way to make tea was to put it in a pot and let it boil till you got the strength out. It wasn't such bad stuff if you let it boil half an hour. Sipping the present weak brew, he thought of real tea and butlers and Bill Hepburn being a snake in the grass, while he listened to the girls and Addie plan for wintering in a climate that would not be too absurdly impossible. Ben knew the climate they meant to sting, and counted to himself the years they had found it possible, so that he would not now be moved to defend it.

Southern California first, "where poppa has large business interests"; then perhaps Florida. They were going to show Hercule and his mother that there were spots less crude than Branlock and people of polish

surpassing Mr. Hepburn's. The pair were finding themselves "fed-up"—the phrase was Vannie's—with their present primitive surroundings.

Branlock primitive! Ben nearly had to laugh out loud at that. And he would not be able to winter some place else. He made this plain to them. Things, even with all his new help, were going bad at the ranch. He'd have to be there even if the climate was impossible.

Addie was sorry; she warned him about getting into a rut. She declared that next year he must throw off the old shackles and spend a bit of time at that adorable château in France. Ben said it would depend on the calf crop and wished them a pleasant winter wherever they might be wintering.

The general saw him off, looking down from a step in the attitude of his portrait.

"We shall be free of Poverty Square. That squalid neighborhood will not again know us."

Poverty Square! Grinding privations! An impossible climate! He wondered what they'd think up next about a life everyone had seemed to enjoy. "Pretty provoking," he called it.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SO Hattie Plum stayed solitary in wardership of the mansion—solitary at first. Then Queen Elizabeth, or another wife of Henry VIII, began to prowls unquietly of nights through the Gothic linen fold, causing its oak panels to creak in welcome, so Hattie had an itinerant aunt in to help her endure noises of undoubtedly psychic origin. The panels did not creak by day.

That winter there was none to rave over the general's portrait—the aunt merely said that his face looked "rashy"—and dust gathered on the bronze graces that looked like no one, but more like art in its larger sense. Elaborate conversational groupings stared one another down in the big drawing-room that was dim with shadows by day and no place to enter by night.

Ben Carcross paid an early visit to the one-time halls of revelry, but found them so uncomfortably reminiscent of Bill Hepburn's voice in alternate song and sob that he did his wintering thereafter exclusively elsewhere. Lone Tree, he considered, was a peach of a place to winter your winters; everyone friendly and not a soul losing sleep over butlers.

The professor began his third writing of the monograph and would read aloud some of its lighter bits of an evening. Ben found it soothing. It was about symbolic or mathematical logic, which seemed to be the

mode trend in philosophy. And philosophy wasn't so hard, Ben gathered; you reasoned from the particular to the general, which was how he had been acting ever since South Ranch got oily. Sometimes Whitey also listened to these readings from the monograph, and Ben, instead of drowsing, would join him in what the professor spoke of as "much wholesome banter." Whitey had no awe of philosophers since hearing that wise crack about curly space.

Miss Ellis began to winter much as a sleepwalker might have, except for week-ends, when Butch Kendrick came in the car she always spoke of as a little bargain they had picked up. She awoke when Butch came, and, according to Whitey, the two would go into a huddle that the screen in a lot of our states wouldn't be allowed to show in its ultimate protraction. Miss Ellis had been ready to join Butch in bonds of wedlock, but Butch knew his shack wouldn't be so good during the winter. The plan was for spring, which Miss Ellis knew must come, though she couldn't believe it. She wrangled fiercely with Whitey over his fanciful conceit that time was nothing. Leave it to Miss Ellis, and time could be simply hell.

Ben told her his wedding present was selected and the fiancée had an instant vision of much flat silver, monogrammed. She becomingly smothered her chagrin on learning the gift would be only a little two-year-old pure-bred bull and a dozen white-faced heifers.

In a brief resuscitation of her hollow society manner she said it was just what they had been wanting. On Butch's next arrival she described the present, prepared to make loyal excuses for the dear old gentleman's

crude conception of a wedding gift; ready to urge: "It isn't the gift itself; it's the thought back of the gift." But she never got to this, because Butch had flung his Chugwater hat to the ground and done a maniac dance upon it, emitting yells which she knew to signify rejoicing. After he had recovered his self-control he imparted to her a few elementary facts about the cattle business, such as every young wife ought to know, and she went with him to seek the donor.

With a hurting conscience she forcibly kissed him while Butch solemnly wrung his hand. Butch spent much of that week-end watching the wedding present monogrammed, but not by a silversmith, causing his fiancée to wonder if cattle might some day estrange them. Before Butch went off again to his lonely shack she had come, however, to realize that life is often like that. Thereafter she fell to earnest sewing under Doyle's direction. She had not hitherto believed that sewing could be anything but a refuge from ennui.

Doyle was rejoiced by the promised nuptials and filled her own winter with a lovely but secret vision. Doyle was deep, and only Mr. Carcross, of the wintering group, observing the sparkle that lighted her eyes while she discussed the glad event, was able to read her heart of guile. Ben knew without being told that Doyle would already be counting on something—on Butch's poor shack being no place for a new baby and on Lone Tree being a right place, with someone there who knew all about babies and could, if properly approached, be teased to look after another one for simply months and months.

Ben even knew—"You're hoping the first one will

be a girl," he bluntly accused her, and Doyle, who hadn't suspected that he could so read her secret heart, had gone red and sort of choked up and rushed from the room.

Whitey witnessed this performance and, being made aware of its hidden values, discovered again that dames are queer. Whitey himself was helping Presh to winter in Branlock. Presh still declaimed the selling talk, but Whitey, with fewer words and a granite face, uttered all the buying talk. Many subsequent car-buyers came to regret the careless delay that had kept them from turning in the old car while a matchless optimist yet did both talks.

Among his other winter sports Ben studied with but languid interest the picture cards that came, first from California and then from Florida, to show palms and wooden hotels and sand. He could find no grass on these, yet he knew that a picture card of Lone Tree showing a fine promise of grass would create no real excitement at Palm Beach.

From the general, detained at America's screen capital, came early reports that the world was about to pay handsomely for a picture that would, even with no spoken word, take war from it forever. It pleased him to get these reports even while noting that the general's canceled checks continued to bear the Hornblatt indorsement. He hoped the old man wouldn't get low in his mind just because their oil money was running low. The general probably believed, as Addie and the girls did, that money was elastic and would stretch on and on with no loss of virtue.

Meantime, it was a good winter for Ben to be glad

that he had kept away from that other money. Of course, there had come from it the new bulls, the cost of the operation, and the pleasant household now surrounding him, including a baby who was no longer a silent picture. It was pleasant of an evening to doze or talk with these people after a hard day, while the radio brought them music from the world of cities, although Ben could not detect that the High Life Hots were one bit better for coming twenty-five hundred miles. Music that made Miss Ellis want to roll the rugs back still seemed to him just a lot of aimless noises.

Doyle's baby enlivened one week of the winter by making sounds in his throat that Doyle said meant croup and Doc Snell said meant nothing of the sort. Doyle and Ben quarreled over that. Doyle said she ought to know. Ben reminded her that she was not the baby's mother and she taunted him with being no father of any baby. But the baby quit making noises in his throat and became once more in his waking moments a turbulent rowdy. Restored serenity enabled Doc Snell to say a few good things about women that pretended to be as smart as genuine doctors.

Doyle again simmered with secret hope when she thought of Miss Ellis, and Ben again placidly wintered with no thought of the mode trend either in pictures or châteaux.

The last official month of the winter passed with no word from the general, but this was disregarded by Ben in the excitement of noting what the spring promised of feed and calves. It was no time to remember a bunch of folks who had, with his hearty approval, gone hay-wire. Then, one morning when a lovely sky,

black and threatening with rain clouds, added to his well-based content, there came a telegram from Addie:

MY LAST CHECK FROM IMPERIAL TRUST COMPANY
RETURNED WITH SOME PALTRY EXCUSE ABOUT LACK
OF FUNDS STOP WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND PLEASE
ATTEND TO IT IMMEDIATELY STOP

Ben studied the message with but little interest or understanding. One of the best herd bulls had gone off his feed, and it might be serious. At so trying a crisis he couldn't give much attention to mere checks, even if they seemed to explode before their time.

A second telegram from Addie:

WHAT AM I TO DO STOP

found the bull convalescing, so Ben gave the matter belated attention. He had an errant impulse to wire Addie merely the word, "Stop." But he did not yield to this; instead, he asked by telegraph what about it.

The general replied that his own last check to Hornblatt had been returned for some absurd reason, and did Ben consider the trust company solvent? Meantime, what should he do about it?

More wires produced a transfer by Ben of funds to Florida and Los Angeles, accompanied by a reminder that they had been derived exclusively from cattle.

This brought from Addie:

ARE WE RUINED

and from the general:

IT WOULD APPEAR THAT I HAVE INADVERTENTLY REDUCED YOU TO BEGGARY BUT I CAN MAKE AMPLE AMENDS IF IT BE POSSIBLE TO SWING ANOTHER BIT OF CAPITAL HORNBLATT IS CONFIDENT STOP

Ben did, then, wire to General Pettigrew the isolated word:

STOP

foregoing the privilege of nine others he could have sent for the same price. He wished these people to get it plain that Lone Tree money was the wrong money for pictures, silent or not, and for bargain châteaux in a foreign land.

Addie, understanding at last that "stop" in one of Ben's telegrams might carry more than a punctuative value, announced that she and the girls were starting home and for heaven's sake to watch poppa, because if not watched he would end it all with one shot. The telegraph operator at Branlock enjoyed a wonderful week.

Ben, during the same week, schooled himself to the thought of ruin. The trouble was, he would have to look ruined. Anyway, they couldn't now blame him for wasting any money on himself or the ranch. Hadn't he paid back the price of his operation and those new bulls to get Addie and the girls out of Florida, the general back from California, and the St. John Smythes back to château land? Still, he dreaded the home-coming of the family, thinking of the talk he must listen to; and he wouldn't have any come-back. He could pretend to feel ruined, but he knew that no

mere cattleman could bring any consolation to a family reduced to beggary.

Once he tried to picture the general ending it all with a shot, but he couldn't make this come alive. Napoleon had been beaten down, yet he hadn't ended it all, and Napoleon's desk set was still here for the general. Something told Ben his father-in-law would reveal the Corsican's resilience in adversity. Still, there would be all the talk, right at a time when he was absorbed by the work of a new season. When he thought of that talk ahead of him, he heartily wished the money hadn't run out on them just then.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

PLACID Lone Tree basked in the sun of early spring. "Lush vistas," as the professor called them, were to be observed on every hand; vistas "teeming with opulence," he also remarked, although the far and near peaks that hemmed them in still shone with winter snow. And now, in perfect harmony with the scene, before the ranch-house door in a sagging arm-chair reposed the General Pettigrew of earlier days, his belt loose, his collar open, one slippered foot rhythmically agitating the rocker of a cradle as he wrote on a pad. There had been no cowardly thought of the river or of one releasing shot. While life offered so many novel aspects the general was not a man to reject its challenge. Nor did he complain; Fate had bludgeoned him, yet, as of old, with exemplary patience, he rocked the homely liquor for his moderate needs the while he brought his best thought to a forgiven world. Things at Washington were by no means going to suit him, but at the moment he worked upon the perfect settlement of Germany's reparations problem. Matters at Washington would again have to wait until the general had treated of the parley on arms at Geneva.

Ben listened to a synopsis of this present work and considered the general's ideas wonderful. But at that, the stuck-ups at Paris and Geneva like as not wouldn't listen to him. Anyway, Ben was glad to believe the old boy was having as fine a time as ever—three good

meals a day and as many clothes as he wanted to wear at one time.

In the end, the entire family had reacted nobly. There had been, at the mansion in Branlock, to be sure, first tears and unreasoned accusations; Ben had listened to talk that caused him twinges of guilt. But this was only at first and in the privacy of a ruined home. From the blinding smoke of disaster they finally emerged wearing, but not too poignantly, the look of those who have fallen, all in a day, from affluence to penury. For the public, Addie and the girls smiled in aprons and dust caps and pushed carpet-sweepers with their bare hands. They had come through.

Addie had said: "You need me now, Ben, and you need the girls. You'll find us at your side. You mustn't think we blame you in the least for this hideous calamity." It was here Ben felt guilty. "We shall try to think it was all for the best, and whatever may come of privation and hardship, you may be sure we shall share it with you as cheerfully as we did in the past."

Ben wriggled in his clothes at that, but kissed them all and said he had long known they were good sports. It was a moment too emotionally tense for him to say that Lone Tree had not been reduced to beggary and that privation, to his knowledge, had never ground anyone present. No good pointing out that they used to think him an efficient provider. He must try to act as one bending under the blast of ruin, because that was how they wished to see him act; but he was glad to get back to the ranch and assure his staff there that he had long ago been vaccinated for ruin.

Still they had shown themselves to be fine girls. Vannie, the minx, had—and with no conscious virtue—announced that she would once more teach school. The serious Gail was taking up her poetry again. She had given Ben a copy of her first poem after the debacle, telling him it had been “forged in the crucible of suffering.”

*One day I watched a ship sail by,
Away, way out at sea,
And as it sailed along its course
These ideas came to me:
Perhaps if I have aims like it,
For aims I'm sure it has,
I, too, may sail on charted seas;
May follow clearer paths.
And if I, too, am strong and true
As sailors on a ship are,
Perhaps I'll sight a distant port
And safely make the bar.*

Ben thought this was a darned fine piece of poetry, showing that Gail had the right stuff in her, ruin or no ruin. He lodged the copy beneath an edge of his mirror. The family was once more herd-broke, and Lone Tree would be looked upon with some respect. No longer was it the hobby of an eccentric millionaire. Cows and Ben Carcross had again come into their own.

So there was now another happy time at Lone Tree, marred only by the departure of Professor Abercrombie. Addie had said, with a quiet pathos, that she supposed all of his new help would still be required at the ranch, and Ben had coldly replied that it would,

except that he had consented for a time to give up his doctor of philosophy to a university with first claim on the man's services. The other help, he said, were secured to him by long-term contracts.

In bidding his friends farewell Professor Abercrombie warmly stated that he left the farm with a profound regret. Ben told him it wasn't a farm but was still a dandy place for a sabbath year. The professor reminded him that the word was "sabbatical."

"Whatever kind of year it is, come back the next time you get one," Ben urged. "Drift back to the outfit, rig your saddle, rustle a bed and top your string. Of course, if you stay away too long some of your mounts may be a little explosive when you let the hammer down—make a move or two you've forgot about."

"Firearms! How very odd!" said the professor.

"But afoot or ahorseback," Ben assured him, "you'll always get the preference we allow an old hand."

"Thanks a lot, and I have enjoyed myself awfully."

"Get that Einstein friend of yours to come out with you," suggested Whitey. "I can tell him a few things about space that'll help him in his business."

The professor's parting flash was: "My lad, you are completely wet, as the chap said."

Then it came to be full spring on Lone Tree. Ditches were cleaned, the cattle off hay and on new grass, except the herd bulls and the thin cows with young calves. In the belief of Lone Tree's owner, God was doing the rest, and doing it well. Of course, there were the chucklehead buckaroos that somebody still had to tell their jobs to, but that was to be expected and the

moment was really one of high perfection. Ruin might stalk to the ranch gate; there it must stop.

Ben Carcross was happy. And then, upon the serene blue of his skies, arose a cloud, as he had once read, no larger than a man's hand. In horror Ben kept that telegram to himself.

Big money had once happened to a family that was doing fine without it, never dreaming it was having privations—and instantly everyone went loco. Right at the top of their madness they had got all ruined up, but had sensibly learned to like it. After these past happy months of beggary and doing their own housework, if this threatened blow fell on them—well, it would be worse than ever. In fact, if you asked Ben Carcross, it would again be hell let out for noon.

He couldn't bring himself to believe it from a mere telegram that some careless operator might have got all wrong. He steadily—and secretly—hoped for the best until letters should put the catastrophe in plain reading for him. There was no one to comfort him that first day—no one but Doyle. It was good to have her there. If the wrong kind of money actually came again, of course he could have something happen to him—knock down a hip or need some teeth pulled by a slicker. He recalled that he hadn't been feeling too good for a week past.

If they really were all unruined, the news would soon leak out to them. He couldn't keep it under his own hat. Perhaps he didn't want to. Yet when the general got hold of a rumor of it and boomed, "That would indeed be a bolt from the blue!" he winced and was silent. That was a wonderful phrase the general had

thought up—a bolt from the blue—he was saying it over the telephone to Addie. No doubt Addie and the girls had some words of their own pretty near as good, as they replied to him, keeping the wires hot all that day.

It seemed to Ben Carcross as if God was giving him another dirty tryout, like He did with that man in the Bible—Job was his name. He listened to the general rumbling explosively over the telephone, heard the gale of “cackles”—he called them—from Addie and the girls. Then he went desperately to make up a bed-roll. He would beat it out with Art Dugdale to that camp over on a lower slope of Barn-Top where they had moved stock to a summer range. He knew it was cowardly, running this way, but his nerve was broken.

He slept on the ground three nights over there, soaked every night—though by one peach of a rain—and helped the boys get organized. Sometimes, in the glad excitement of this work he could for an hour believe he was a ruined cowman—not again a big oil man. And it still might not be true. It might be a false alarm even if the telegraph company hadn't balled up their gosh-awful message.

The fourth day he slunk back on Red Joe, deep in a depression that grew with every mile he rode. When the descending trail brought him around Yellow Butte, where you could first see the greening spread of Lone Tree, he stopped to look, finding it strange that nothing in that scene should betray the new trouble. There was the good little ranch, its buildings sharply lined in the thin air. At that distance no one would have suspected it wasn't a place of privation where folks were reduced

to a serene and comforting beggary. No one would have known it for a rich man's hobby, a top-dog sporting estate. He studied the shining high spire of his tree and thought of the other tree he had lately helped to plant there. He'd certainly hope to bring that boy up not to get the oil habit. He filled his eyes with the false seeming of peace unrolled there below him, then gave Red Joe his head down the trail.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

AT the barn he morosely unsaddled and with a slap sped his horse to the feed rack. He saw a gesticulating group at the ranch-house door and gained the yard before he was discovered. Addie and the girls were dancing on the steps when they observed his drooping approach. The general did not dance, but he held aloft more telegrams and a fluttering handful of letters.

"Oh, Ben! Ben!" cried Addie and the girls in shrill disharmony. Crazy again!

"I have wired Hornblatt!" bellowed the general.

"We have cabled Hercule about our château," shrilled Addie.

The blow had fallen. "Got a new butler yet?" Ben sourly demanded, but no one heard him. He must listen to abhorrent details recited by the general. Three sections of land south of South Ranch in the Kettleman Hills district; poor stuff bought long ago from a railway company eager to sell for a song that even Ben Carcross could sing. Some green madness of spring had betrayed him into purchasing land which two head of cattle to the township would overstock. Then, last year, people got suspicious of that whole region, and the first drill had bitten, at three thousand feet, into a lake of oil—three thousand barrels a day, and the richest oil ever known by the weak-minded who look for oil. Twenty-seven to thirty-five Baume test; bonanza oil, 60 per cent gasoline.

"You can take it right out of the ground and run your car on it," boomed the general.

"Baume test!" Ben, sagging in the old armchair at the center of the demented group, wondered who Baume was and wished him no enviable fate.

"Zowie!" The general fell into low speech in the greatness of that moment. "In hop the lease hounds and find our three sections spang on the axis. That man Puckett you had down there—the poor cuss thinking he was out of a job!—gets bids, and then leases to the Great Eastern Oil Company—five hundred dollars an acre for our nineteen hundred and twenty acres! Figure the grand total for yourself, my boy!"

Ben weakly pushed away the repugnant multiplication. "You figure it," he muttered. "You will anyhow."

"And that nine hundred and sixty thousand dollars isn't the best of it," the general bellowed on—"Nor the worst," thought Ben—"We get a sixth royalty on all production; one well to each twenty acres. Figure it yourself—land that has been proved—figure to yourself the money rolling in to put us all beyond the reach of want."

"You figure it," said Ben once more, savagely now. He called to Curly Hatton, passing with a mended bridle on his arm. "Hey, Curly, there's a weak cow slunk her calf in that bunch of willows down this side of West Slough. Go and 'tend to it. And say!" Curly halted. "Tell Art Dugdale I want those feed racks fixed today."

"Why, Ben dear, aren't you well?" This was Addie, diverted from counting oil money to a wifely solicitude. The others stared at one who had shown no befitting emotion over sensational news.

Ben winced as from pain. "Too much baking-powder biscuits and half-cooked beans over on Barn-Top, I guess," he mumbled.

"And Bill Hepburn wired that another company would have raised the lease bid to an even million dollars, but it came too late. Forty thousand dollars lost like that." The general airily snapped his fingers—a descriptive touch.

Whitey lounged forward. "That Hepburn man was probably late with his news, because he had a crying jag on. Some weeper he is! Night of the party, when he was crying on everybody's shoulder, I told him his right name was Old Man River. He chased me through the butler's pantry—"

This was interrupted by Addie: "The employment agency promised yesterday to send me a butler and two assistants today. We must meet the train; perhaps we can all have a quiet little home dinner tonight."

Ben thought of the quiet dinner with a butler and two assistants. Maybe this butler would be a bass. "I feel some fierce pains right across here," he announced, claspings his hands right across there.

Doyle, watching him narrowly, clutched at Miss Ellis, who had been a wide-eyed, but silent member of the group. "Why, he isn't fooling this time," she gasped in dismay. "You come with me," she ordered Ben, and led him from noisy money to his bed, followed by the now anxious Miss Ellis.

In spite of their hustling hands, Ben stopped in the living-room long enough to reverse the broom that some of the help had stood up wrong. How many times did he have to tell them?

At four o'clock that afternoon, unquietly in bed since Doyle had put him there at noon, he began to call for Doc Snell.

Doyle returned, time after time, from the telephone to announce that Dr. Snell was out on a case; a long case, from which he couldn't return until tomorrow.

An hour later—good old Pete Snell still remote in some mountain fastness, so Doyle insisted—she confided to the sufferer that she had remembered an old friend in San Francisco who knew quite a lot about such cases as Mr. Carcross was hotly promising to develop. Putting aside Ben's persistent talk about Doc Snell, she admitted having urged this friend by wire to make Lone Tree in no time at all. It would be a nice outing for him. Ben knew then that the copper top was putting one over on him.

It was pretty queer. To get away from all that fool talk about oil he'd said he felt some pains, and no sooner had he said pains than there they were, no fooling! Talk about the devil! Still, he knew Doyle wouldn't let him be handled wrong.

The friend she told of came the next day and, perhaps because Ben had passed a restless night with some pains that were no fooling, the man made a rather poor impression on Lone Tree's owner. Only a small, dry, quick-mannered cuss with a beardless face, although well old enough to raise something there, he proved to be a regular Abercrombie for ignorance of details about the cattle business that any schoolboy would know, and Ben couldn't discover that he had really wanted an outing. He refused to talk much on any subject; another of those prodders that hurt you and

looked wise, but didn't tell you anything. He seemed to know about those little thermometers that you taste, but was one of the same smarties that pretend they don't have to look at their watch when they feel your pulse.

And he wouldn't stay at the ranch and be a good fellow. Not only that; he wouldn't let Ben stay there. They bundled him up, for all his rough talk, and had him in bed on a train in jig time—Doyle certainly had queer friends. There were a lot of people at the station, including Doc Snell, who denied that he had been out on a case the day before. He had been right in his office the whole day. Ben glared at Doyle, but the brick top said the ranch telephone must have been out of order. Doc Snell looked hurt.

Butch Kendrick was also at the train, having followed the party from Lone Tree in eleven minutes flat. Butch had new clothes and a shave and his yellow pelt newly cut, round at the back. He had groomed and appareled himself thus in the belief that he would be a married man before sundown that day, and anything to the contrary was appalling news to him. Miss Ellis talked to the point as the train paused:

"I have to go."

"But how about our getting married?" Butch's lips quivered, his defenseless blue eyes swam.

Miss Ellis, at this sight, dried some beginning tears of her own and pushed up at his shoulders with tight fists. "I'm crazy about you, Butch, but listen here. You'll have to spot second with me any time this old boy is up against it." She kissed him thoroughly and did not look back as she entered the train.

Even had she looked back she would hardly have recognized the tall, tastefully dressed, personable gentleman of middle age who followed her into the car. This was none other than Burton G. Hemingway who, to Miss Ellis, her anguished eyes overflowing with a vision of forsaken Butch Kendrick, would have been no more than a human blur—possibly human.

Ben in his berth—rebelliously, because it was nowhere near human bedtime—demanded the presence of Mr. Hemingway after a couple of red-eyed nurses had fussed a lot with him. He had noticed Burton G. on the platform, and the capable banker had all at once seemed to be land for a spent swimmer.

At the mention of old Mr. Hemingway Miss Ellis tactfully absented herself, and Ben commanded, at the same time, the withdrawal of Doyle, when his mild suggestion of it had failed to move her.

"You heard about this new money," Ben said when Burton G. had come.

Mr. Hemingway had heard, with the rest of Brantlock, and said so, nicely blending felicitation with condolence for Ben's apparent indisposition.

Ben really wanted to look out of the window and see his home country rushing past the train, but he must settle something.

"Well, listen; I got to be in some hospital a few days—colic or something—so I want you to take charge of that money, understand?"

"Yes, certainly." Mr. Hemingway's eyes glistened.

"I don't feel up to going through another spell of ruin that brings so much talk," Ben declared with weak irritation. "Getting old, I guess."

Mr. Hemingway looked sympathetic and remained discreetly silent.

"I wouldn't mind their spending it all—any old way they want to. But I can't stand to hear them gabble about privations and beggary when it's gone, understand."

Mr. Hemingway made a skilful percussive noise with his tongue on his teeth—this was no way to speak of money. But he listened without other protest.

"A cattleman can run a ranch," said Ben, "but it takes a banker to ride herd on big money. And those folks have got to be kept rich this time."

"Just so," smiled Mr. Hemingway. "You had some definite plan?"

"Yeah, I got a plan. I'll sign something for that Imperial Trust Company and no one is to draw checks but you and me. We'll loosen up with all the money they want in reason, only not to any more Hornblatts." Ben gestured a rebuff to siren Hornblatts.

"He's the one that put us on the rocks for about seven hundred thousand dollars, in round numbers, with a picture that maybe is worth that much, but you can't get anyone else to believe it. We can get the general interested in something that won't cost so much as taking war away from the world. Let him play marbles, but not for keeps."

"I see," replied Burton G. "Excuse me one moment." He left, but returned very soon with a portfolio of glossy leather and, with the Hemingway fountain pen, Mr. Carcross loosely signed his name a few times on lines indicated to him. Hornblatts would now lure in vain. He wouldn't again have to ride that blast of

ruin, and get saddle sore. Mr. Hemingway's exit, after suitable good wishes, permitted the return of Ben's nurses.

"Going to feed me another thermometer, I suppose?" he grimly inquired. He proved to be right, but the glass tube did not impede his flow of thought. What he'd ought to of done—he'd ought to of put Hemingway on his staff long ago. A family of poets needed a banker trail boss like a faro game needed a case keeper and a look-out. Abercrombie had once called them all poets—incurable poets. Ben hadn't understood it at the time. Presh a poet, who had never written a line of poetry in his life! But maybe the professor had meant something true, even if he didn't say it plain. Anyway, poets or crackpots, a sane banker was going to ride herd on them from hence on.

With the tube out of his mouth, he began to caution Doyle: "We mustn't ever let that boy get big money on his mind. Have him find some work he likes—that cattle business ain't so bad—and he'll be happy at it no matter if it only makes him three meals a day and one cheap suit of clothes a year. That's the way to start a boy; give him something he likes to do and to hell with the big money. You can't only use just so much money and the rest spoils on you. What's that in the Bible about that stuff—manna or something—that wouldn't keep?"

Doyle pushed the tumbled gray hair back from his eyes and told him to be quiet. He tried to be quiet, thinking again about the family of poets. Of course, Gail was a poet—a regular one—but he bet a thousand barrels of oil to a thin dime nobody would ever catch

Presh writing a good piece of poetry. He found now he could remember some of Gail's dandy piece:

*And if I, too, am strong and true
As sailors on a ship are,
Perhaps I'll sight a distant port
And safely make the bar.*

He'd bet none of the rest could write as good poetry as that, even if they were incurable. When Doyle's, dry little friend then looked in on him, Ben was mirthfully moved to compare his rather long, earnest face to the face of good old Veazey, once the best little cutting horse in the outfit, only he would waste hay; and maybe Hemingway ought to be told about that too. Maybe Veazey was a poet along with the others. Anyway, here Veazey was in this Pullman car, dressed in a funny suit of clothes and wearing glasses with a little gold chain.

On this discovery Ben laughed at Veazey and told him to take his hay out on the platform where it wouldn't make such a litter. He also wished the porter to come in and brush up the hay Veazey had spilled. He warned the old horse that if he wanted to draw any more hay he'd have to ask Burton G. Hemingway for it. Did he think hay fell out of the sky? Ben recited poetry again:

*And if I, too, am strong and true
As sailors on a ship are —*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SO the mangled remains of Ben Carcross—all that was mortal, with a residue possibly immortal—were trundled along a tiled corridor and into a room where awaited him two nurses with eyes reddened and hands that would tremble. It was a sunny room with ivory tinted walls and a connecting bathroom, from the open door of which still came a definite hint of cigarette smoke. Miss Ellis had simply been forced to smoke her head off there—rather gulpingly—while that thing was going on upstairs. Pink roses were on the mission table and a now-lifeless radio might be seen.

Doyle's dry little friend with the bony face—not actually resembling good old Veazey—still there were suggestions—looked in upon them and low-toned, anxious talk was had. Doyle's friend seemed cheerful enough, but shrugged non-committally as he went out. The case breathed softly as a child in sleep. The nurses withdrew tearfully to the far side of the room and on a leather couch clasped each other's hands. After a time of this each urged the other to go off and get some needed rest. Smiling, pained refusal from both, and they were silent again.

At length Miss Ellis said, "Well, I'll be darned!"

Doyle made no immediate response, her eyes of uncertain hue piercing a wall to something far off. "He's just a little boy," she at last said.

"Ain't life hell!" demanded Miss Ellis in a vivid flash of clairvoyance. "What's it all about, anyway? Here we are back in uniform, with that same old dear in bed there, and you'd think it was a year ago and I was just a free-lancing fluff, going to be stepped to-night by some gin-hopped interne. Where does time go to—and what of it?"

"Whitey says time isn't anything much."

"Whitey!" Miss Ellis wiped her eyes and sniffed. "That boy never came down to earth after the first time he went up. His crack about 'time isn't anything' don't explain what it's all about. What I mean, we simply have to do so many things we really know better than. Look at me, turning down a swell National Bank, with marble pillars in front, for a chance to—to go native! Say, don't think I haven't watched those poor ranchers' wives coming in to that hick town for an afternoon's whoopee, buying calico and molasses and safety pins and shoes for Junior—"

Doyle brought her eyes back with a gleam she instantly veiled. "Babies! Of course you know I'll always be willing—"

Miss Ellis couldn't wait for the end of that. "A swell chance you'd have to get a baby of mine! What do you suppose I'd want one for—just to do you a favor?"

Doyle was soothing, still full of guile. "It will be terribly rough on that ranch. No more chiffon stockings; no more—"

"And red hands and a wind-blown bob I could get any time by looking out the back door. You can't tell me anything about what I'll be up against. But I'd

like to see you or anybody else get Butch Kendrick away from me—or any baby, either.”

“You might change—I mean just at first, with all that rough work.”

“I have changed. I’ve never been in my right mind since Butch and I first tangled. But I want to tell you it’s a permanent. Though I still don’t know what it’s all about nor how I was had.”

Late that evening the two nurses, still stubbornly performing double duty, hovered above the case as he began to mutter about the feed racks that Art Dugdale hadn’t done something to. He wasn’t going to stand any more nonsense about those racks. A moment later he was reciting poetry.

*“And if I, too, am strong and true
As sailors on a ship are ——”*

“What’s ‘Sailors on a ship are’? Still off somewhere spearing fish,” whispered Miss Ellis.

After a while the case came back from this or another sport and opened sane eyes on them. “I have enjoyed myself awfully,” he said. The nurses fled to the bathroom for a moment’s solace of tears.

“Hey!” he called feebly after them. “They ain’t got me licked yet. Don’t think it. Coming out of the winter strong—big-boned. I’m fractious!”

Doyle returned hastily. “Of course you are! Y-you’ll soon be hard to ride.”

“Same old outlaw,” he assured her. “They give out silver cups to anybody can stay on and bring me up standing.”

His other nurse here tremulously inquired if she might get him some music.

Yes, he said, he would crave some nice music, but nothing that would make you roll the rugs back. "This is Sunday, ain't it? Something kind of like a church where they pray."

Doyle turned the dial, but found a noisy one at first. She dialed on to a calm, deep voice: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." More faintly the noisy one still came with this.

"Some preacher wise-cracking," explained Miss Ellis. Ben's other bondwoman gently moved the dial; the noisy one became noisier.

"Try for that preacher again," the case ordered.

The dial was reversed toward the preacher, but still came the flat tinkle of a banjo, drum throbs and the lawless rumble of a saxophone. The dial subdued this, but it seemed they must still take it if they wished the preacher whose deep voice could now be heard above the jangle: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures—"

"Green pastures!" echoed the case.

"You're always likely to get between two stations Sunday night," whispered Miss Ellis above the mutter of drums, the banjo's tinkle.

Doyle listened to the dissonance. "That's what it's all about." She had turned to Miss Ellis, who looked puzzled.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me—"

The saxophone disbelieved and, anyway, didn't care. Hoarsely it jeered its unconcern.

Doyle held the dial, fascinated by the conflict. "There's life for you—all of us hung between two stations. That's what it's all about."

Miss Ellis stared at her with considering eyes. The saxophone jeered on. Doyle silenced that and found a plaintive, quiet one about some contralto's baby.

"Yeah," said the case; then pleaded: "Can't we get back to green pastures?"

Doyle dialed, seeking that first voice. Suddenly it spoke:

"He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,"—drums, the saxophone—"his leaf shall not wither,"—drums again—"and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

"Li'l' young tree," smiled the case drowsily. "Ought to name the ranch Two Trees now." A long pause. "I'll be there—I ain't—licked—yet."

THE END

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